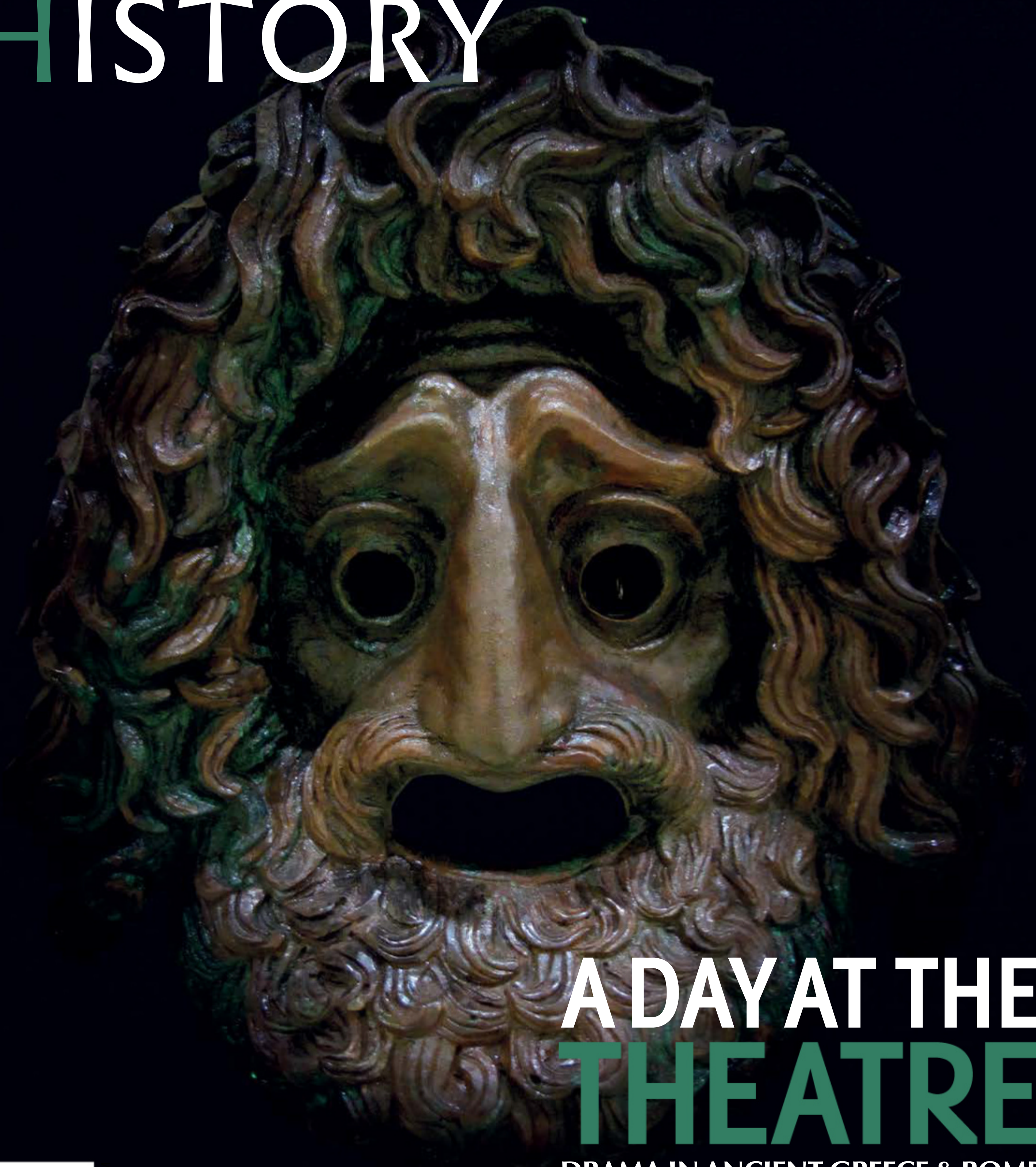
IN THIS ISSUE: ACTORS, PLAYS, PERFORMANCES, AND THEATRES IN THE CLASSICAL WORLD (CA. 580 BC – AD 550)

ANCIENT HISTORY

NO. 42



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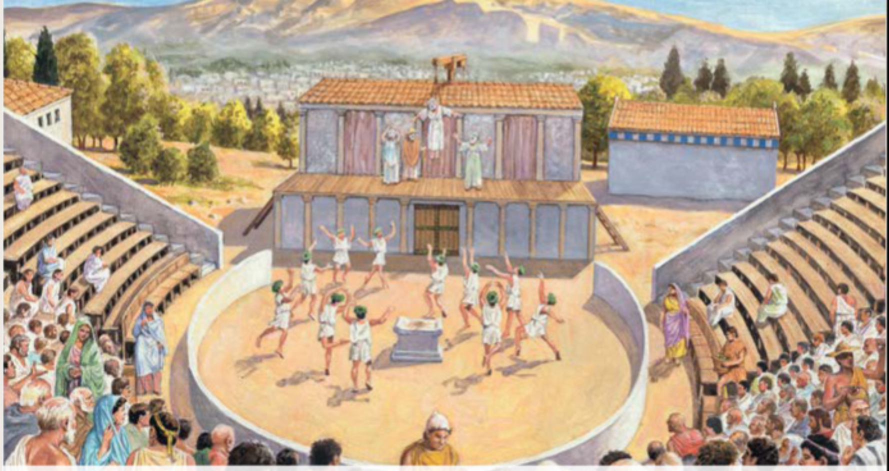
ON THE COVER

There are many differences between ancient and modern theatre. Of the differences, the use of masks in Greek and Roman theatre is by far the most alien to modern audiences. Masks were emblematic of the theatre. Actors performed masked, Dionysus' cult statue was masked, and they could also be dedicated as votive offerings. This bronze tragic masks is thought to have been such an offering. Based on the hairstyle, the mask may be accredited to the sculptor Silanion and dates to the mid-fourth century BC.

© Lauren van Zoonen



A DAY AT THE THEATRE

The theatre is an iconic element of Greco-Roman culture, with dozens of plays and hundreds of theatres surviving today. Without the theatre, the ancient Mediterranean would be a very different place.

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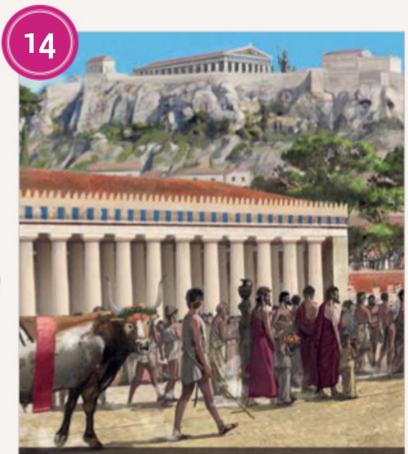

DRAMA FOR DIONYSUS

Once an Athenian religious festival, theatre soon spread across the Mediterranean.

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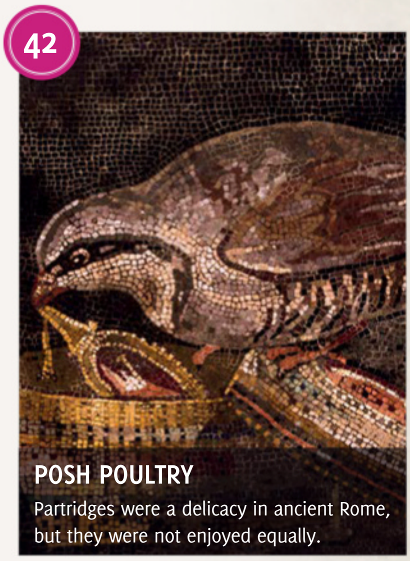


POSH POULTRY

Partridges were a delicacy in ancient Rome, but they were not enjoyed equally.

EDITORIAL – *MUSES, MASKS, AND MACHINES*

Going to the theatre is now, for most, a rare event, if people go at all. Yet, for the ancients, theatre was one of, if not the, primary forms of entertainment, and in its early stages (pardon the pun) the theatre had a central civic importance. It is perhaps appropriate to equate going to the theatre in the ancient world with the prominence of streaming services in the modern world.

When one thinks of theatre in the ancient world, ancient Athens probably comes to mind. Athenian playwrights dominate the literary record and the Theatre of Dionysus can still be seen today. However, ancient theatre was by no means confined to Athens, but spread across the Mediterranean throughout a great period of time. Given its importance to Greco-Roman societies, the culture of the theatre is more deserving than most topics of its own issue. However, we must content ourselves with one issue – for now, at least.

This issue is very much designed to provide as varied an introduction to ancient Greco-Roman theatre as possible. A look at the contents will show that the articles range, chronologically, over 1000 years of history, from 500 BC to AD 500, and the topics covered are just as varied, from the mechanics of theatre productions to the status of actors. We hope you enjoy exploring this topic as much as we did.

Owain Williams
Editor, *Ancient History*

Farming and fishing in ancient Britain

The agricultural and fishing preferences of ancient Britons have been revealed in two important studies in Scotland and Orkney. They paint a picture of a very different world compared to the intensive farming methods and diversified food consumption of modern Britain.

A Neolithic site dating to around 3800 BC was discovered by archaeologists at Bal-

Egyptian cheese found

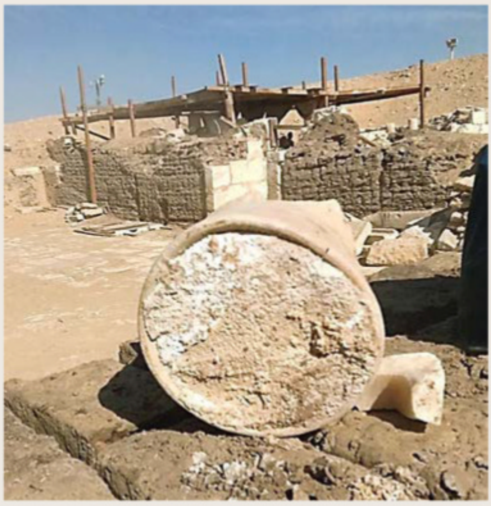
Several blocks of white cheese dating back to the 26th and 27th Dynasties of ancient Egypt (664–404 BC) have been found by archaeologists working at Giza's Saqqara necropolis.

The sixth archaeological mission to Saqqara exposed several pottery receptacles, inscribed with Demotic script, which contained the 2600-year-old cheese.

This is not the first ancient cheese to have been found in Egypt. Two alabaster jars, also found at Saqqara and dating to the First Dynasty (ca. 3100–ca. 2900 BC), contained cheese.

It was a type of diary product now called *mish*, a traditional Egyptian cheese made by fermenting salty cheese for several months or even years. When ready to eat, *mish* has a yellowish-brown colour and a sharp, salty, and pungent taste.

The Egyptians had been making cheese since 3000 BC. Milk from cows and goats was used. Curd, whey, and milk cream were considered delicacies by many ancient Egyptians.



© Courtesy of Enrico Greco, University of Catania, Italy

Found in Saqqara, this whitish block is believed to be an incredibly well-preserved ancient Egyptian cheese.

Located some 32 km (20 mi) south of Cairo on the west bank of the Nile River, the Saqqara necropolis has produced an astonishing collection of sarcophagi, mummies, and grave goods in large numbers.

The archaeological mission to Saqqara is headed by Dr Mostafa Waziri, Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

Found in the tomb of Meketre, Thebes, and dating to ca. 1981-1975 BC, this miniature model of a cattle stables offers a fascinating glimpse into Egyptian farming practices.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This cylinder vessel from the tomb of Hor-Aha, the second king of the First Dynasty (ca. 31st century BC), is thought to have contained *mish*, a type of Egyptian cheese.

© Einsamer Schutze/ Wikimedia Commons

bridie, Aberdeenshire in Scotland. The site included a hall constructed of timber. Excavations conducted between 1977 and 1981 retrieved 20,000 cereal grains preserved when the building was destroyed by fire in the early fourth millennium BC.

Using stable isotope analysis to measure the ratios of carbon and nitrogen, a team of researchers has now studied the grain specimens. They revealed that 5800 years ago farmers did not use manure to fertilize the soil.

"The stable isotope analysis revealed very low nitrogen levels showing that the crops were not grown on manured soils," said lead author Dr Rosie Bishop of the University of Stavanger in Norway. "The large size and number of the grains recovered suggest that during this first phase of farming, the soils were productive *without* the need for manuring."

Comparing Balbridie to other sites of the same date, the archaeologists conclude that a variety of cultivation strategies were implemented across Northwestern Europe. They may have varied according to the natural fertility of different soils, the extent of stockkeeping, and the ready availability of manure, as well as access to labour and the crop management expertise of these Neolithic farmers.

The results of the scientific study are published as "Scotland's first farmers: new insights into early farming practices in North-west Europe" in *Antiquity* Volume 96, Issue 389.

Three millennia later in Iron Age Britain (ca. 800 BC–first century AD), despite the abundance of marine life around the islands, there is very little evidence for fish being consumed by the Britons. A new discovery may challenge the generally accepted view that fish was absent from the diet.

Experts at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Archaeology Institute analyzed a tooth from a woman's jawbone, which was recovered during excavations of a broch at The Cairns in South Ronaldsay, Orkney. The jawbone with two teeth had been placed inside a container made from a whale vertebra. It was found to be that of a woman living during the Iron Age around AD 200.

By examining layers of dentine laid down over time as her tooth grew, and of dietary isotopes embedded in those layers, the scientists could identify evidence of food consumed during her lifetime. Archaeologists at UHI studied the dentine from when she would have been three, seven, nine, eleven,

(Top) **The Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae, on the west coast of Mainland, in the Orkney Islands, was home to the Grooved Ware People, who are believed to have reared cattle and sheep and to have grown barley, in addition to significant fishing activities.**

© Archaeology Scotland / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom) **This stone axe was found in Skara Brae, attesting to the ingenuity of the islanders.**

© Nachosan / Wikimedia Commons

MORE ONLINE
Read more about the researchers' findings: https://bit.ly/3Bj5PB8

This object, known as The Ochre Horse and dating from 12,500 years ago, is one of the earliest representations of animals, in this case, a horse, from Britain. The rib bone fragment was found in Robin Hood Cave, on the border between Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

© Dave / Flickr

thirteen, and fifteen years old. The results revealed that the woman had eaten fish-rich meals throughout her entire life.

"Now we can see that the marine foodstuffs that she ate were after all a normal part of life for her, and this allows us to move on with further investigation of the mystery over the apparent lack of seafoods in Iron Age society at this time," said Martin Carruthers, site director of The Cairns excavations and a lecturer in archaeology at the UHI Archaeology Institute.

The fact that seafood seems to have been avoided throughout the rest of Iron Age Britain around 1800 years ago opens up a new avenue of investigation. Relatively few fishbones have been found in Iron Age middens and the analysis of human remains elsewhere suggests that marine protein was avoided, despite how ubiquitous and all-encompassing the sea was for communities in Atlantic Scotland.

Why so little fresh fish was consumed in Iron Age Britain is not understood. Catching fish at sea may have been technically difficult, or perhaps there were cultural restrictions or taboos regulating its consumption.

Roman-era Greek theatre discovered in Crete

Excavations at the archaeological site of Lissos in south-west Crete have uncovered the remains of a Greek theatre dating to the first century AD. The project, directed by Dr Aikaterini Tzanakaki, Deputy Head of the Department of Prehistoric-Classical Antiquities and Museums of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania, is the first excavation at the site in 62 years, since the Asclepeion, the temple of Asclepius, was discovered in 1959.

Fourteen rows of seats have been uncovered, as has part of the stage and two side buildings. Given the theatre's proximity to the Asclepeion, the theatre may have also functioned as a civic building, such as a bouleuterion. A similar association of central civic buildings with an Asclepeion can be seen in the city of Messene in the south-west Peloponnese.

The temple was destroyed by boulders after an earthquake in the late fourth century AD.

Revealed: the donkey's African origins

Donkeys have been important enablers of human civilizations since the earliest times. For millennia, they were a primary source of work and transport for many cultures. Yet, little was known about the origin and domestication of donkeys – until now.

An international team of 40 scientists sequenced the genomes of modern and ancient donkeys. They found compelling evidence of an eastern African origin over 7000 years ago. Significantly, they established that there was subsequent isolation and divergence of lineages in Africa and Eurasia.

To explain their history of domestication, the scientists constructed a comprehensive genome panel of 207 modern and 31 ancient donkeys, as well as 15 wild equids.

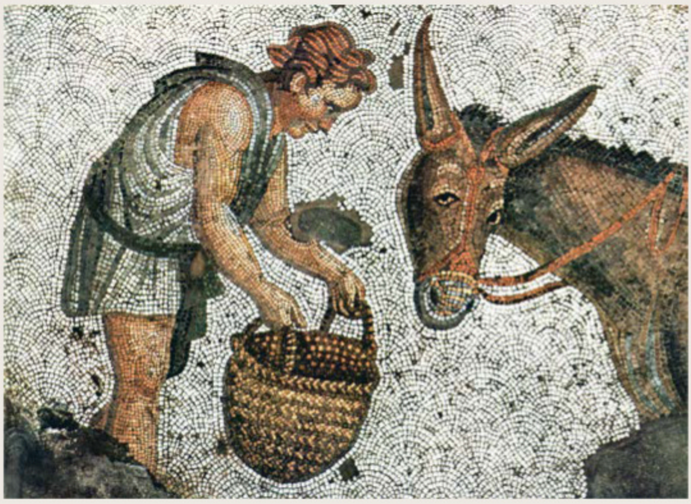
"We found a strong phylogeographic structure in modern donkeys that supports a single domestication in Africa ~5000 BCE, followed by further expansions in this continent and Eurasia and ultimately returning to Africa," the researchers state in their paper.

They explain: "We uncovered a previously unknown genetic lineage in the Levant ~200 BCE, which contributed increasing ancestry toward Asia. Donkey management involved inbreeding and the production of giant bloodlines at a time when mules were essential to the Roman economy and military."

They also revealed the imprint of desertification on divergence among groups and specifics about donkey breeding and husbandry, including selection for large size and the practice of inbreeding.

Donkeys transformed human society as the essential beasts of burden for long-distance transportation of people and goods, especially across semi-arid and upland environments. There are more than 40 million donkeys in the modern world.

The findings are published as "The genomic history and global expansion of domestic donkeys" in *Science* Volume 377, Issue 6611.



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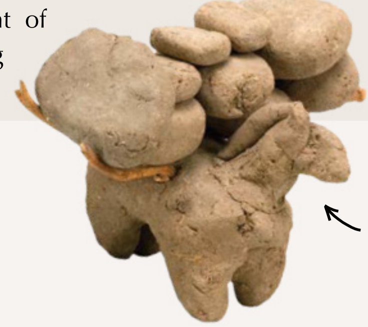
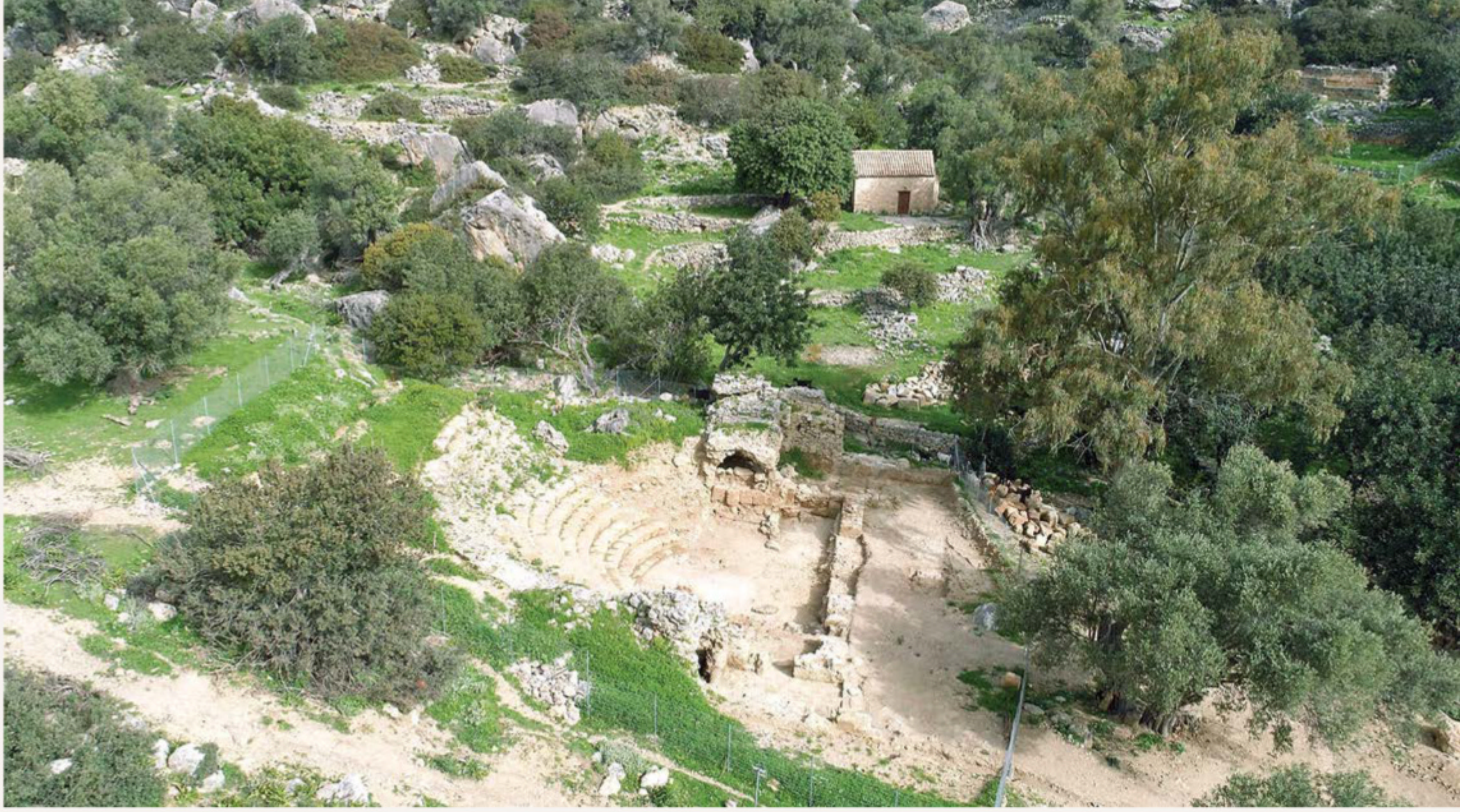
A mosaic from the fifth century AD, from the Great Palace of Constantinople, depicting a child holding a basket towards a donkey, presumably trying to feed it.



An Egyptian clay sculpture of a donkey with a pack on its back, dated between the Second Intermediate Period and the New Kingdom (ca. 1991–1450 BC). Donkeys would have been beasts of burden in Egypt long before they arrived in Europe.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Similar destruction from the same period has been found throughout the eastern Mediterranean, such as at other sites on Crete, at Corinth, and in the region of Cyrenaica, where the Palace of Columns at Ptolemais was destroyed. The tsunami that hit Alexandria, recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus (26.10.15–19), may have also been the result of this earthquake.

Once buried under boulders, the front seats and stage of the Roman-period *odeon* of Lissos have just been unearthed.

© Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports

A Roman cemetery hides grim secrets

The bottom of a fourth century AD drinking glass depicting a gladiator armed with a sword and trident.

© Paul Hudson / Flickr

The discovery of eighty skeletons during excavations in the city of York, England in 2004–2005 caused a sensation at the time. Forty-eight of them had been decapitated from behind. The question archaeologists then asked was: who were they? Now visitors to the Corinium Museum can see the grisly remains and decide for themselves.

York Archaeological Trust (YAT) uncovered the inhumation burials at Driffield Terrace on a site located across the Ouse River from the legionary fortress of Eboracum, which was part of a large cemetery on the outskirts of a civil settlement.

The remains shared some striking similarities. They were all male and all under 45 years old. Several of the victims had suffered perimortem decapitation. Their skulls were buried with their bodies – some placed on the chest, some between the legs, while others were laid at their feet.

Archaeologists quickly speculated that the skeletons were of gladiators. However, others proposed that they could have been criminals, or even soldiers. They could, of course, be a mix.

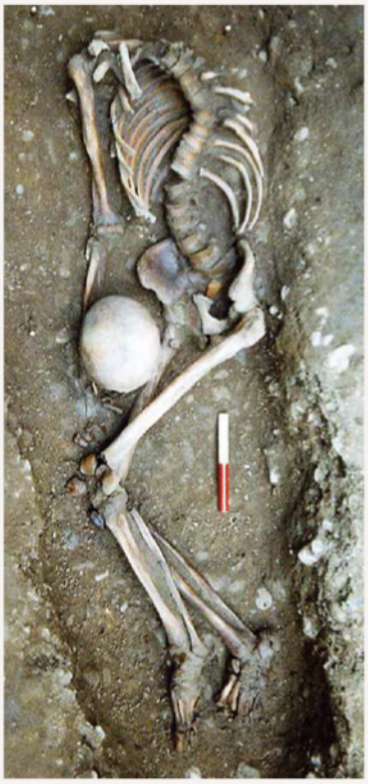
The new special exhibition, *Gladiators: A Cemetery of Secrets*, attempts to reveal more about who these people were, where they came from, and how they died. Visitors can inspect and assess the evidence for up to six skeletons for themselves through a range of audio-visual material, including facial reconstructions, CT scans, and recorded subject matter expert interviews.

YAT chose seven individuals for whole genome analysis. They were found to be taller than average for Roman Britain. All but one individual had brown eyes and black or brown hair, but one had blue eyes and blond hair. Genomic and isotopic analysis revealed six to have originated in the British Isles and one to have origins in the Near East.

Despite all the study, the stories of the individuals remain enigmatic. The *Gladiators: Cemetery of Secrets* is at the Corinium Museum, Cirencester and runs until 23 April 2023.

One of 80 skeletons found in Driffield Terrace, outside York. Found with the skull buried beside the rest of the skeleton, scholars are still unsure why.

© York Archaeology Trust



500 AD
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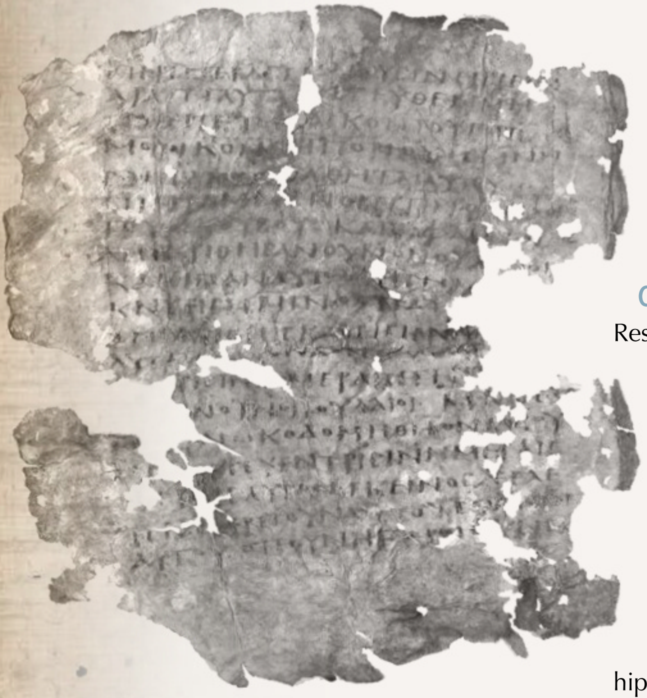


This fragment of papyrus, found by Grenfell and Hunt during their excavations, contains a fragments of the Gospel of John, dating to the fourth century AD.

THE TREASURE OF OXYRHYNCHUS

A TEXTUAL POMPEII

Discovered more than a century ago, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri are among the greatest treasures from the ancient world. Scholars gained access to Greek literary texts, Christian documents, and administrative documents. Only a fraction has been published.

By Jona Lendering

To preserve Egyptian papyri, the climate must be dry, and the site must not be subject to the annual flooding of the Nile. Among the sites that fit the bill are the Hellenistic towns around Lake Fayyum, to the south-west of modern Cairo, and Oxyrhynchus, a bit further to the south.

GRENFELL AND HUNT

Research started in late 1896. Two British scholars, Bernard Grenfell (1870–1926) and Arthur Hunt (1871–1934), chose the site with the explicit aim of securing ancient texts. Since their colleagues focused on the great monuments of Egypt, they explained, peripheral areas remained ignored and were open to plundering. Thus, papyri might come on the market without documented provenance. Oxyrhynchus was a great site to look for manuscripts: it had not been looted and was sufficient of a city to have many temples, a decorated main street, a hippodrome, a theatre, and several monasteries. A few years earlier, in 1879, Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians* had been found in Oxyrhynchus.

Grenfell and Hunt were particularly interested in the Christian material. In 1892, the text known as the *Gospel of Peter* had been published, with an exuberant vision of the resurrection (including a talking cross). The discovery of this non-canonical gospel suggested that it was possible to recover other lost texts. More specifically, Grenfell and Hunt wanted to find Bible manuscripts from before the fourth century AD. Those early fragments would help determine whether the text of the Bible had been copied adequately.

The two men continued to work at Oxyrhynchus until 1907 and found more than they had dared to hope for. The total number of texts, ranging from tiny scraps of papyrus to a parchment book, is estimated to be around half a million. It comes as no surprise that Grenfell and Hunt did not always succeed in documenting their finds as exactly as possible. Dating from the period between 300 BC and AD 700, they are written mostly in Greek, but there is also Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, Persian, Arabic, and Coptic material. The 83 volumes of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* published so far contain only 5500 of these texts.

CHRISTIAN TEXTS

The order in which the finds are presented in the various volumes of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* illustrates the priorities of the discoverers and their contemporaries. First came the theological texts; then hitherto unknown Greek literary texts; next, Greek texts that were already known; then the Latin texts; and finally all other texts in roughly chronological order.

So, the first papyrus in the first volume of the series (known as P.Oxy. 1.1) was a text that Grenfell and Hunt called *Logia Iesou*, 'sayings of Jesus'. They would later find two more copies of this text, which was identified as the *Gospel of Thomas* when a Coptic version turned up in the late 1940s. There is still debate about its origin and there is a possibility that this gospel contains reliable information about the teachings of Jesus.

Of the other gospels, fifteen fragments have been found of Matthew and fourteen of John. Mark and Luke are represented with two copies each, which is fewer than the ten copies of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a Christian text that was never included in the canon. Here we catch a glimpse of a pluralistic Christianity, as it existed before orthodoxy grew.

The Oxyrhynchus Papyri also document persecution. In a letter from AD 304, a Roman official reports that he was unable to seize gold, silver, money, clothing, animals, slaves, lands, or property because the church he searched did not possess them. This confirms what is known from Christian sources, but there is also material that helps to correct the old picture. For example, five certificates from Oxyrhynchus attest that the emperor Decius (r.249–251) required an oath of allegiance, which the Roman citizens had to take by sacrificing to their ancestral gods and eating the sacrificial meat. A universal oath of allegiance, however, is not the persecution that the Christian authors from late antiquity mention. And decades before the rise of orthodoxy, not every believer objected to the eating of meat dedicated to deities that did not exist anyhow.

Moreover, a private letter shows that when a sacrifice to pagan gods or the emperor was required, a Christian could send a substitute.

GREEK AND LATIN

The second category of Oxyrhynchus papyri consisted of unknown Greek texts. In addition to Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians*, several unknown plays were found, such as Sophocles' *The Searchers*, a part of Euripides' *Hypsipyle*, and parts of at least six comedies of Menander. In addition to these, a biography of Euripides by a certain Satyros, a work of history known as the *Oxyrhynchus Hellenica*, and a fragment of a speech by the Roman general Germanicus are worth mentioning.

Many authors were already known, such as the Greek poets Alcman, Anacreon, Corinna, Hesiod, Ibycus, Pindar, Sappho, and Simonides, of whom small, large, and dubious fragments were found. Homer was already known to have been a school author and this was confirmed by a great many fragments. Scientific literature also circulated in Oxyrhynchus: for example, there were fragments of Euclid's famous *Elements*.

Latin texts are rarer – or less frequently published. Among the texts from Oxyrhynchus, however, is the draft of an inscription that soldiers of the Fifth Legion Macedonia made to honour the emperors Diocletian and Maximian. A copy of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* appears on the back of a summary of seven lost books by the Roman historian Livy, while one of the copies of the *Gospel of Thomas* was written on the other side of a Latin land register.

A LIVING CITY

In addition to literary texts, Grenfell and Hunt found many texts relating to day-to-day matters. A separate genre is the acclamation, by which a gathering of citizens addressed eulogies to those in authority.

"Long live the Roman power, long live the emperor, long live our governor! Prosperity to those in authority!" is the introduction to a series of compliments to one Dioscurus, who was the first citizen, under whom the blessings of Oxyrhynchus increased endlessly, who was the source of all good, and who had to listen to all these compliments when the governor visited the city.

Other texts document public life, such as the programme of the horse races, which also included other spectacles, such as tightrope walkers and athletic contests. Another papyrus contains a contract in which the business agents of two wrestlers agree that one of the fighters will lose to the other and earn 3800 drachms. The third century AD being an age of whooping inflation, the parties specified that it was coins of the ancient silver value. Further business letters have been found as well as a variety of other business records.

THE LIMITS OF THE EXCAVATION

The Oxyrhynchus Papyri give a picture of daily life in the first centuries AD. Few texts have been published from the preceding period. They do exist, of course, such as an allotment of land to a horseman. However, this is an exception, and the scarcity of papyri from the Hellenistic age remains a puzzle. Perhaps the excavation offers the explanation: the deepest layers were close to the water table and the oldest papyri are too damaged to be read and published.

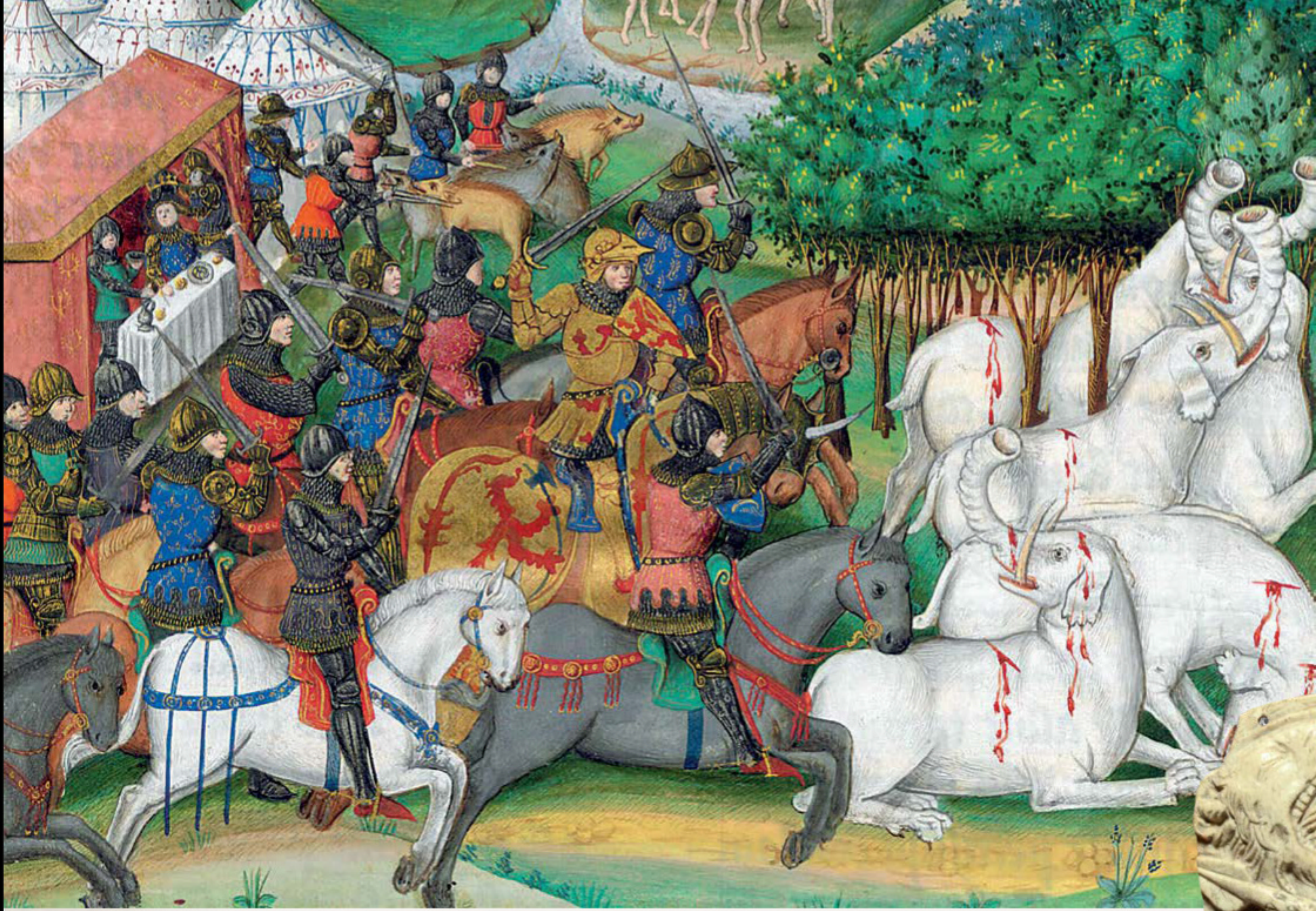
There are still plenty of interesting records from late antiquity to about fifty years after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century AD. Then it stops, possibly because the top layers were blown away.

A LITERATE SOCIETY?

The huge variety of texts gives the impression of a fully literate society, but appearances are deceiving. A report of theft ends with the comment that Diogenes wrote this down on behalf of the illiterate Nechthenibis. Occasionally, a clerk offered a personal note. When a certain Syneros sighed in a letter that excessive goodness was a disaster for humanity, the clerk added that it was the greatest disaster of all.

In the sense that you see how ordinary people lived, Oxyrhynchus is really a Pompeii in texts. AH

***Jona Lendering is the webmaster of Livius.org, author of several books, and first editor of* Ancient History Magazine.**



Starting in the first century BC, so-called 'Alexander Romances' chronicled the life of the famous king. While the general facts of his life found in the ancient sources were usually included, many also added other anecdotes, ranging from the plausible to the fantastic. This illustration comes from a fifteenth-century chronicle by Jean Wauquelin, and shows Alexander hunting elephants in India.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL CARTLEDGE

By Richard Marranca

MYTH AND MYTHMAKING IN THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Professor Paul Cartledge, Emeritus A.G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture, Cambridge University and author of several books on Alexander the Great, is one of the foremost classicists. In this interview, he delves into the mythic side of one of the most dynamic, successful generals in history. From his birth to his death (and afterwards), Alexander's life was bathed in myth.

Sporting one of Alexander's famous artistic features, long, mane-like hair, this bust, dated to ca. AD 175-200, is believed to represent Alexander the Great.

© Herbert Frank / Flickr

Hello, Professor Cartledge. First off, can you define myth? And can we start with Alexander's birth? Did Olympias believe she had an affair with Zeus that produced Alexander?

A myth is a traditional (originally oral) tale with partial reference to something of broad social-cultural significance usually involving gods or other supernatural agencies. As for Alexander's birth, we, of course, are reliant on others to relay what may have been Olympias' own view of the matter, whether publicly or privately expressed. It seems that she was the kind of person to believe in the literal truth of what others might consider at most metaphorical. I can well believe that she told Alexander privately that his real father was not Philip but Zeus. (A similar sort of tale

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found its way into the much later *Alexander Romance* – that Alexander's father was 'really' Nectanebos, the last pharaoh of Egypt.) Such myths had an important – politically legitimating – function, quite apart from their literal or otherwise 'truth'.

What gods were family ancestors? What did that mean for Alexander?

Alexander's 'Temenid' patriline claimed literal, physical descent via their ancestor Temenos ultimately from Heracles and thereby Zeus.

What does it mean that Artemis was present at Alexander's birth, and did people believe that, or did they sort of go along with it?

A Roman bone plaque depicting the head of Heracles in his lionskin headdress.

© Walters Art Museum

Artemis was for all Greeks a goddess of childbirth and, therefore, most appropriately present at a human birth. If the humans in question believed gods and goddesses really did come down from Olympus in person, to mingle with humans on earth, then they would have believed that Artemis could literally have been present.

King Philip realized that Bucephalus might not be the right horse for Alexander. Bucephalus is a real horse, but is the story about Alexander's taming of the horse real?

Bucephalus was a quite exceptionally fine Thessalian-bred stallion with a white blaze on his muzzle in the shape of a stylized ox-head, hence his name. A horse trader knew he'd get the best price for him from super-rich Philip of Macedon – but it took the genius of a young Alexander to tame Bucephalus. The story is told in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. It is not absolutely certain – though I myself believe it – that Alexander commanded the Companion Cavalry at Chaeronea. How was Philip confident that Alexander could do the job? He would have seen that from a young age Alexander was a superb horseman.

In Alexander the Great, *you wrote: "This in itself speaks worlds both for Alexander's prowess and for Philip's faith in his command abilities." How did Alexander get so precocious in the art of war?*

Philip would also have seen how Alexander was able to exercise authority among and command respect from his aristocratic peers. So, in 340, when Alexander was only 16, Philip left Alexander as regent of his entire kingdom when he went a long way to the east on campaign. Alexander took the opportunity to fight – and win – a battle and rename a city Alexandroupolis!

Your biography delves into how Alexander became king – possibly Olympias and Alexander had a role in Philip's murder. Alexander erased some family members and subdued foes. By modern standards it's very cruel, but in the ancient world isn't that a path to survival and the pursuit of power?

Yes! Already back in the Homeric epics a king, in order to be a true king, must rule 'by might'. But that could be interpreted in different ways. When he became king in 336, Alexander was only 20 and he had many powerful enemies and rivals, both within and outside the Macedonian kingdom. When threatened, Alexander always showed himself at his most ruthless.

This marble column drum, dating to ca. 325-300 BC, was found in Ephesus, site of the monumental temple of Artemis that was considered a Wonder of the World. While Artemis was supposedly attending the birth of Alexander, her temple in Ephesus was burned to the ground.

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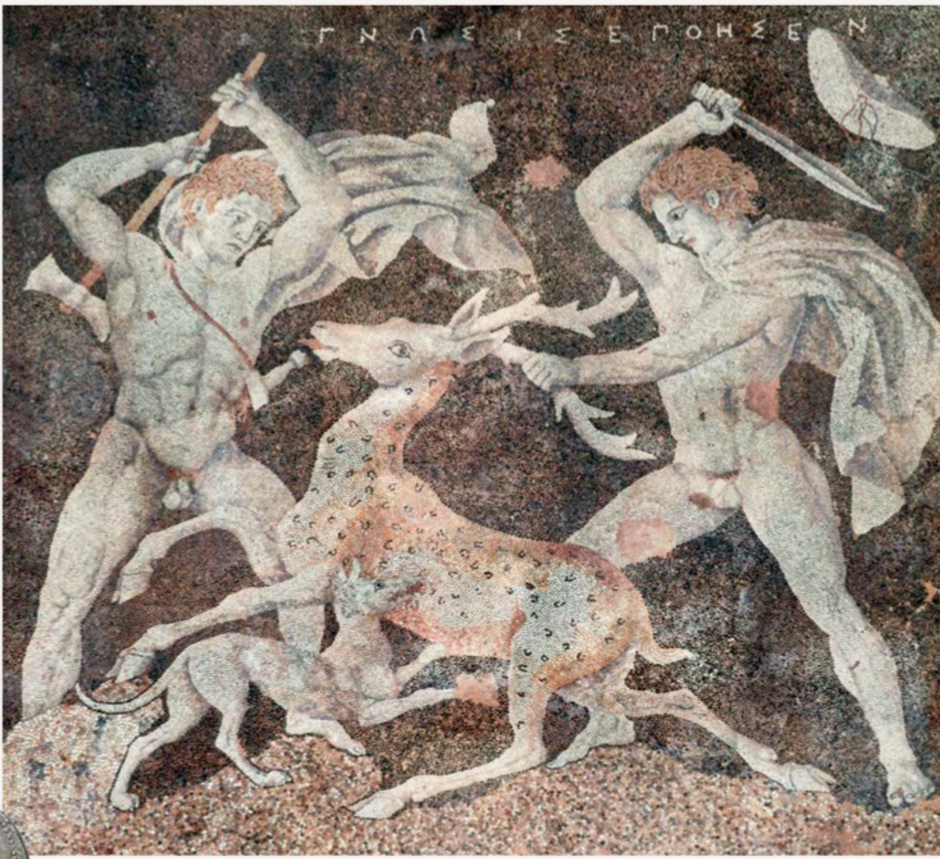

This mosaic, dating to ca. 325-300 BC, once decorated the House of the Abduction of Helen in Pella, and is thought to represent Alexander and Hephaestion.

© Livius.org

A silver drachma from Pelinna, Thessaly, dating to the late fifth to early fourth century BC. The Thessalians were known for their horse-rearing and Alexander's horse, Bucephalus, was also said to have been Thessalian-bred.

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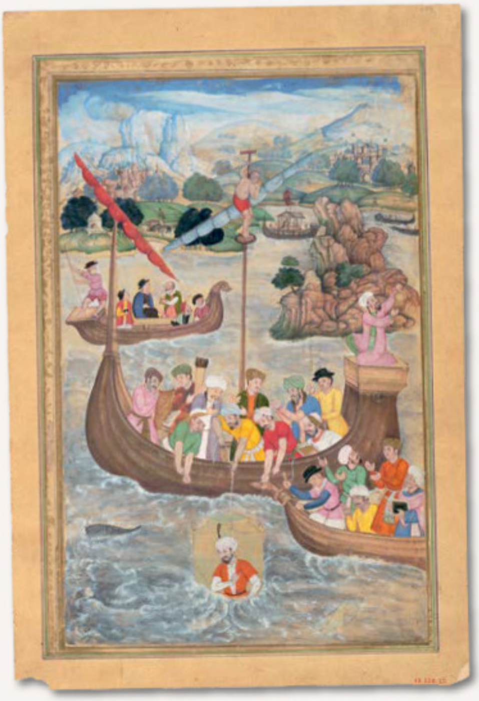

The *Alexander Romance* quickly spread to many cultures across Europe, the Near East, Central Asia, and India. This scene, illustrating Alexander being lowered into the sea in a bathyscape, comes from a late-sixteenth-century *Khamsa* produced for Mughal emperor Akbar.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The hero and heroics

What about Alexander and Hephaestion's jog around Troy and things of that sort? Is that in the mythic realm?

Yes, but also in the realm of real-world propaganda. A key part of Alexander's own myth – personal and dynastic – was that he was a kind of reincarnation of Achilles. Hence, Troy.

In battle, Alexander had the Medusa breastplate and led from the front. He also treasured his copy of Homer's Iliad *annotated by Aristotle. Do such things demonstrate that Alexander was an embodiment of the warrior ideal of Achilles and other heroes?*

Pothos is, I think, something to be kept separate from the idea of destiny. Alexander's *pothos* was called into play when he contemplated a really major project – such as reaching as far east with his army of conquest as 'Ocean'.

Alexander crossed the Hellespont and, in three successive battles took control of the Persian Empire; after that he entered Egypt and became pharaoh. Is it true that the further east he went and the more he enlarged the empire, the more god-like he seemed to be?

There is evidence that some Greeks had already worshipped his father Philip as a living god. But it took quite a bit of persuading for that idea to catch hold for Alexander, too. Egypt was a different matter: for Egyptians the pharaoh was a living god, so, when Alexander became their pharaoh, he automatically became a living god for them, too.

Oracles, myth, and history

Alexander often listened to the pronouncements of his seer Aristander and the oracles. In Alexander the Great*, you write that "There was also a powerful stream of the religious mystic in him." Can you reflect on this?*

The most successful army of the Greeks before Philip and Alexander's Macedonians was that of the Spartans. They took military prophecy (*mantike*) deadly seriously. The Spartans too were very religious, or superstitious. In this key respect, Alexander was following the Spartans' lead.

How do ancient and modern historians know what's true and what isn't?

Arrian did not strictly write a biography of Alexander but a narrative history of his military campaigns. He had, to us, strange reasons for choosing his two principal sources, one of whom was the Macedonian Ptolemy who became the first of the Hellenistic Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty. But when we compare the sober and sensible account of Arrian with the more or less fantastical accounts of other surviving writers (Curtius, Diodorus, etc.), Arrian's has to be preferred.

What else was part of the myth-making process? I mean artists, sculptors, historians, propagandists? Who sang Alexander's praises?

[Important in terms of myth was] the way Alexander chose to have himself represented visually – in sculpture and painting, especially, but also on coins. Plutarch gives the main names.

Do you think that Alexander actually stopped to visit Diogenes?

That story is set in Corinth, where Diogenes (the Cynic) was said to be living in a *pithos* (storage jar). Of course, it has its mythic elements – man of action meets man of thought, who is rude to the world's greatest future conqueror. But the two could have encountered each other – Corinth was where the League

The ruins of the Macedonian palace at Pella, seat of the Macedonian kings. Built on a hill at the northern edge of the city, its construction can be linked to Pella's expansion in the late fourth century.

© Cortyn / Shutterstock

This Attic terracotta *lekythos*, dating to ca. 420 BC, attributed to the Eretria Painter, depicts two scenes connected to Achilles, who Alexander emulated.

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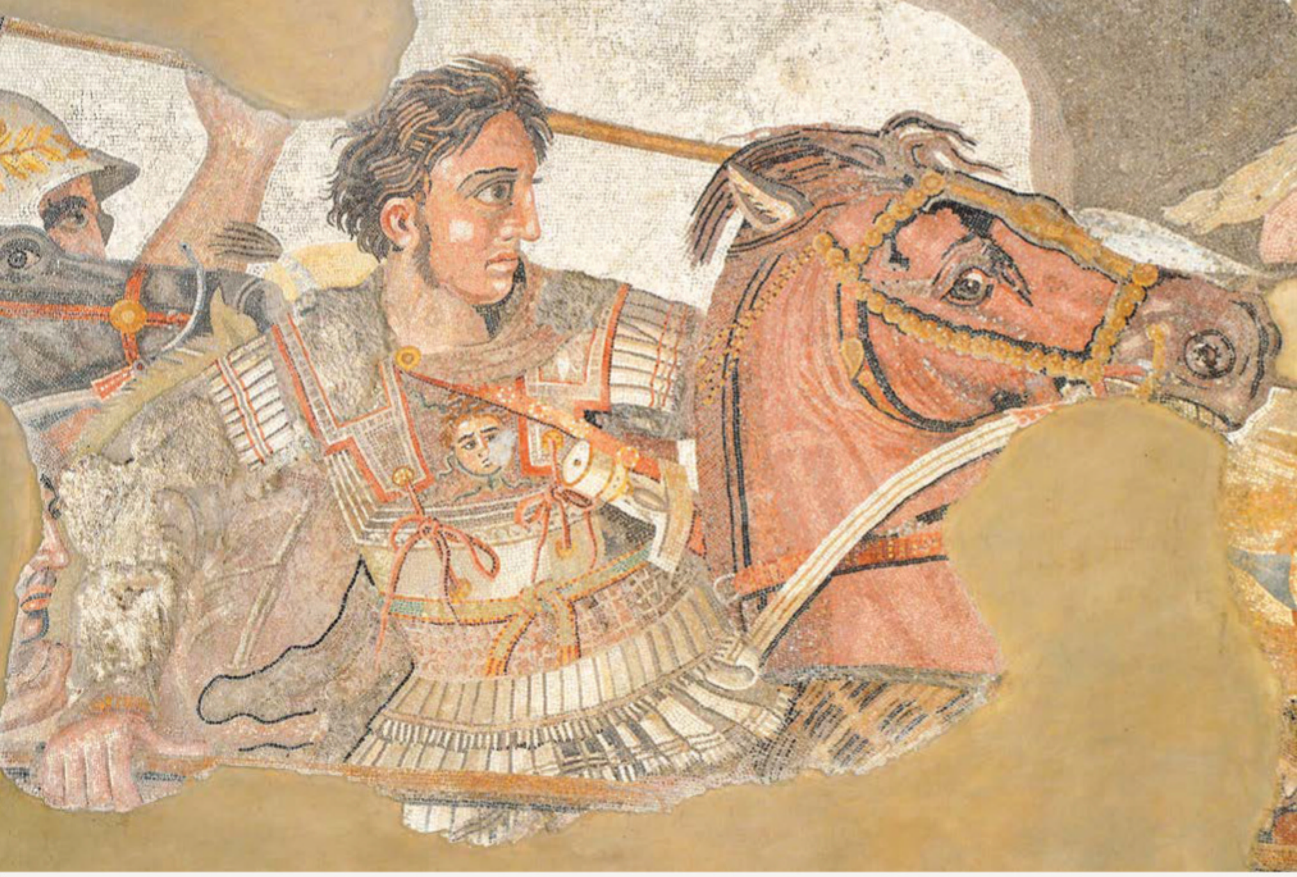

Dating to the third century BC, this bronze applique of Ptolemy I depicts the ruler of Egypt as the god Dionysus.

© The Walters Art Museum

named after it held its meetings following 338/7, and it was the League that authorized Philip's Persian expedition.

Death and burial in Egypt

Soon after Alexander died, Ptolemy, his friend and general, hijacked Alexander's corpse, bringing it back to Egypt. What's that about?

When Ptolemy got hold of Alexander's mummified corpse near Damascus, Ptolemy was 'only' Satrap of Egypt. By acquiring as a talisman this corpse and having it reburied in the new capital that Alexander himself had marked out in 332, at Alexandria, Ptolemy elevated his status – putting him, a commoner, in a position to declare himself King of Egypt in 306.

What's the Alexander Romance *tradition? Do you have a favourite tale?*

The *Romance* originated in Alexandria in late Hellenistic times (1st century BC) in Greek. From there it took wings – being translated into Latin and then in the Middle Ages entering the national literatures of many other countries. Perhaps my favourite tale is the notion that Alexander was so curious he went to the bottom of the ocean in a glass bathyscape. From the non-Hellenic tradition inspired by the *Romance*, my favourites concern Alexander's reception in Islamic countries, even to the extent of his featuring as 'Two Horns' in the Quran!

Did you spend time with Oliver Stone who directed the movie Alexander*?*

I did indeed meet and have lunch with Oliver Stone, a remarkably intelligent man as well as brilliant screenwriter and movie director. Unfortunately, his Alexander movie was not his best … He couldn't make up his mind what sort of Alexander he wanted Colin Farrell (a poor choice, in my view) to represent. I co-edited a volume of academic essays on the movie.

If you could travel back in history, is Alexander on your top five or ten list?

Definitely in my top ten ancient Greeks! But still quite a long way behind Epaminondas of Thebes … **AH**

Richard Marranca recently took part in the NEH seminar Ritual in Hinduism and Buddhism at Holy Cross College. He is a teacher and author recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His Egypt manuscript will be published soon by Blydyn Square Books.

A detail from the famous Alexander Mosaic in the House of the Faun in Pompeii. Dating to 100 BC, it depicts Alexander the Great leading a charge atop Bucephalus against Darius, the king of Persia. You can see the head of Medusa upon his armour.

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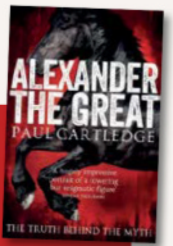

Paul Cartledge's book *Alexander the Great* is a fascinating portrait of one of the most famous men in history. Exploring both Alexander's life as well as modern popular culture's fascination with him, the book reveals much about the ancient conqueror and his reception throughout history.

Dating to ca. AD 215-243, this golden medallion was part of a hoard with twenty similar medallions, along with eighteen gold ingots, and six hundred gold coins issued by various Roman emperors, from Severus Alexander (r. AD 222-235) to Constantius I (r. 293-306). This particular example bears the inscription 'Alexander the King'.

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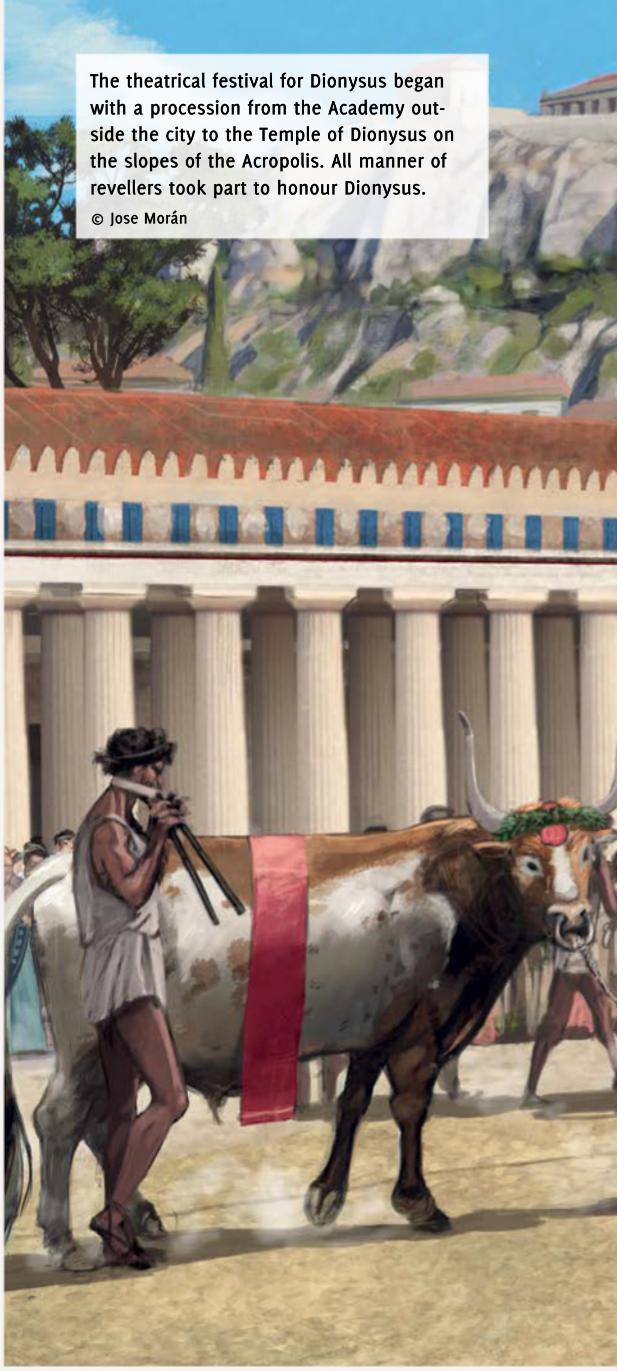
THEME

THE CITY DIONYSIA IN ATHENS

THEOPHORIC THEATRICS

Going to the theatre in ancient Athens was an event of great importance. It had both religious and civic significance, bringing the community together, and performing in the Theatre of Dionysus could bring lasting fame.

By Rosie Wyles



The theatrical festival for Dionysus began with a procession from the Academy outside the city to the Temple of Dionysus on the slopes of the Acropolis. All manner of revellers took part to honour Dionysus.
© Jose Morán

Picture yourself on the south slope of the Acropolis in ancient Athens. Far below you out towards the horizon is the bustling port, the Piraeus. It's late March; ships can sail in and out again. Seated on a wooden bench, set on the hillside, you're eagerly awaiting this year's plays. You're not alone. The audience of ten thousand, made up of local Athenians and visitors to the city, are anticipating the performances together. This is more than a drama festival though; it's also a religious occasion, a celebration of Dionysus, god of theatre and wine.

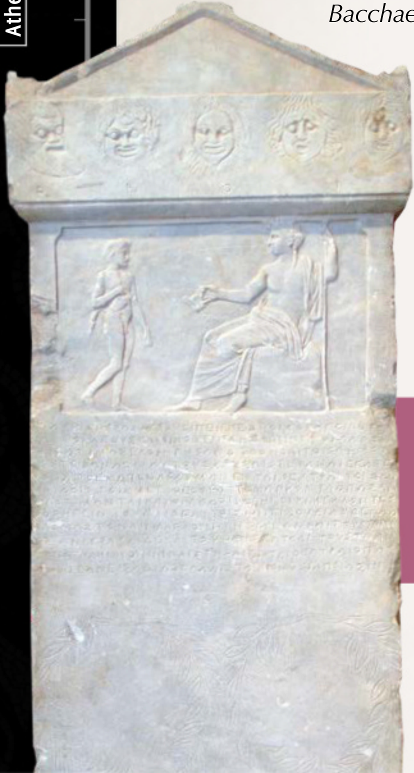
A theatre festival for a god

The Great Dionysia, or City Dionysia, was at once a drama competition and a religious festival. At the centre of the festivities was the god Dionysus. His worship included the use of masks, which allowed the wearer both to lose their identity and to assume another. Moreover, the god would be represented in cult as a pole decorated with a robe and mask. This construction of identity through costume and mask was mirrored in the theatrical process.

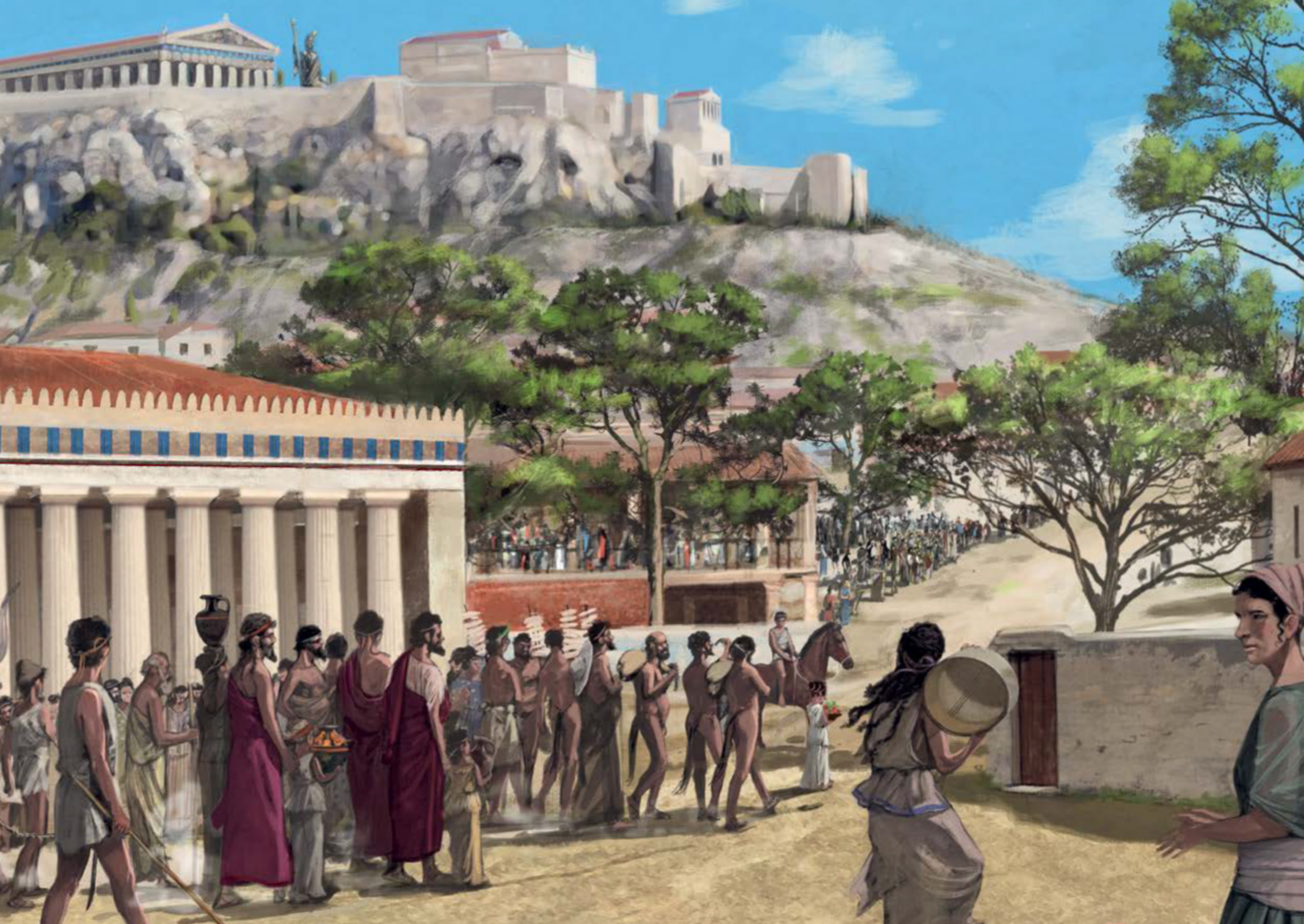
Dionysus was the god of both theatre and wine, associated with a joyful release from the everyday. His worship had a wild side, encapsulated in bacchic ritual. Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae* offers a graphic depiction of this aspect to the deity's veneration. In the play, the women of the city leave their houses to become female followers of Dionysus – maenads. They dance and sing on the mountainside. It is innocent enough until, in their ecstatic state, they tear apart cattle and even, under the influence of Dionysus, kill the king himself.

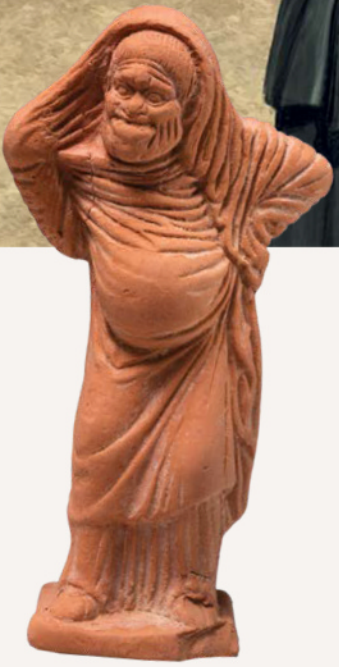
The festivities of the City Dionysia, however, were far more civilized, tamed by their focus on the city and its ideology. The celebrations were joyful and, in parts, gloriously indecent, but they were not wild. In fact, the events were carefully engineered to celebrate not only the god but the city as well. The festival lasted for five days during which a procession, sacrifices, drinking, a singing competition, a dramatic competition, and civic ritual took place.

It began with the procession, known as the *pompe*. This was visually spectacular and a treat for the senses as giant loaves of bread on spits, wineskins, and the bull chosen for the god were paraded past. Groups of men sung hymns to Dionysus while carrying large *phalloi* to celebrate the deity's association with fertility. The parade ended at the sanctuary of Dionysus



A dedication from the deme Auxone honoring *choregoi* (wealthy Athenians who financed the chorus) named Auteas and Philoxenides, dated to ca. 313 - 312 BC. The relief depicts a seated Dionysus and a satyr approaching him, with several theatrical masks above them.
© Marsyas / Wikimedia Commons





situated alongside the theatre of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis. This was the location for the sacrifice to the god.

A theatre festival celebrating the city

After the procession on the first day and across the following four days, there were performances in honour of the god. These took place through three competitions: one in choral singing, one between comic playwrights, and one between tragic playwrights. While the festival represented a break from the ordinary business of the city, with an embargo on the meeting of its governing body (the Assembly) and a pause to legal proceedings, the Dionysia was nevertheless an ideologically charged occasion.

The performances played out the prized Athenian democratic ideal of participation. The dramatic choruses, groups of performers who sang and danced during the comedies and tragedies, were made up of Athenian male citizens. It was in fact a legal requirement that chorus members were citizens. Moreover, the duty was taken seriously enough that training in a chorus could entitle a citizen to exemption from military service.

The selection for the dithyrambic competition was even more explicitly linked to civic life. The dithyrambs, songs for Dionysus, were sung by choruses of 50 (there was a men's and boys' competition). The ten teams that competed were drawn from the ten 'tribes', the administrative units into which Athenian citizens were

One of fourteen terracotta statuettes of a comic actor found in a grave in Attica, dating from the late fifth to early fourth century BC. The group of statuettes are among the earliest known representations of actors.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

An engraved bezel of a Greek gold ring, dated to ca. 400 – 350 BC, depicting a dancing Maenad, one of the female followers of Dionysus.

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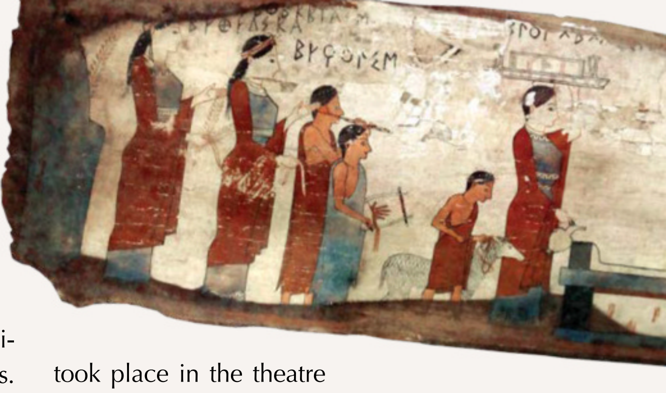

A painted wooden plaque, dated to ca. 540 – 530 BC, depicting a procession of worshippers. The plaque was found in a cave above the village of Pitsa, possibly a dedication to the Nymphs, one of several deities thought to reside in caves.

© Schuppi / Wikimedia Commons

grouped, thus presenting the opportunity for 1000 individuals to feel more closely integrated within their civic grouping.

It is ironic that this festival should have become such an effective tool for democratic Athens when it was most likely originally masterminded by the tyrant Peisistratus. While scholars exploring the origins of tragedy have often looked to earlier forms of Dionysian worship, the shaping of the City Dionysia is accepted to have been down to the intervention of Peisistratus in the sixth century. Once Athens emerged as a democracy, the festival's important civic role continued.

The festival's seamless intertwining of the religious, dramatic, and civic is exemplified by the pre-performance civic rituals. These took place in the theatre in front of the assembled audience before they watched the plays. Notable amongst them was the public display of 'tribute' brought by cities belonging to the Athenian empire, laid out in the *orchestra*, where the choruses would later dance.

A further political statement was made by the presentation of the 'war orphans'. These were young Athenians whose fathers had been killed in war. The city looked after them until they came of age. Then, as the accompanying proclamation announced, they were ready to fight for the city. Dressed in armour, they paraded in front of the assembled audience, showing to friends and foes alike that the city could not be put down.

Four days of plays!

The lion's share of the festival was taken up with the dramatic competitions – one for comedy and one for tragedy. The spectators watched four days of plays presented in the open-air theatre. The competing comic playwrights produced just one play each. The three competing tragic playwrights, however, composed a 'tetralogy', a set of four plays made up of three tragedies and a satyr drama (a sort of mythological comedy depicting the antics of satyrs). Originally the festival had only a tragic drama competition, but about 50 years into its existence, in 486 BC, the comic competition was added.

The comedies took the form of contemporary satire. The surviving plays by Aristophanes reveal that no-one was exempt from his keen observation, critique, and wit. His comedies blend politics, vulgarity (scatological humour is not infrequent), and literary parody. Aristophanes takes particular pleasure in parodying scenes from tragedy, especially those by the tragedian Euripides. On one level, the fun of it is in the ingenious playfulness of these comic 're-makes', but

(Top) A detail of the *skene* and *orchestra* from the Hellenistic remains of the Theatre of Dionysus on the Athenian Acropolis. The theatre underwent several reconstructions in its time, leaving the earliest levels of the theatre obscured to archaeologists.

© saiko3p / Shutterstock

(Bottom) The front row seats of the theatre were known as *prohedria*, seats of honour, and were reserved for important officials and priests and, in the Hellenistic period, they were elaborated carved compared to the seating for the rest of the audience.

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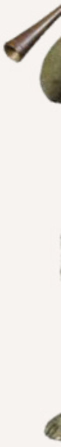

A frieze of the Theatre of Dionysus from the late fourth century BC.

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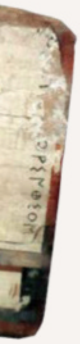

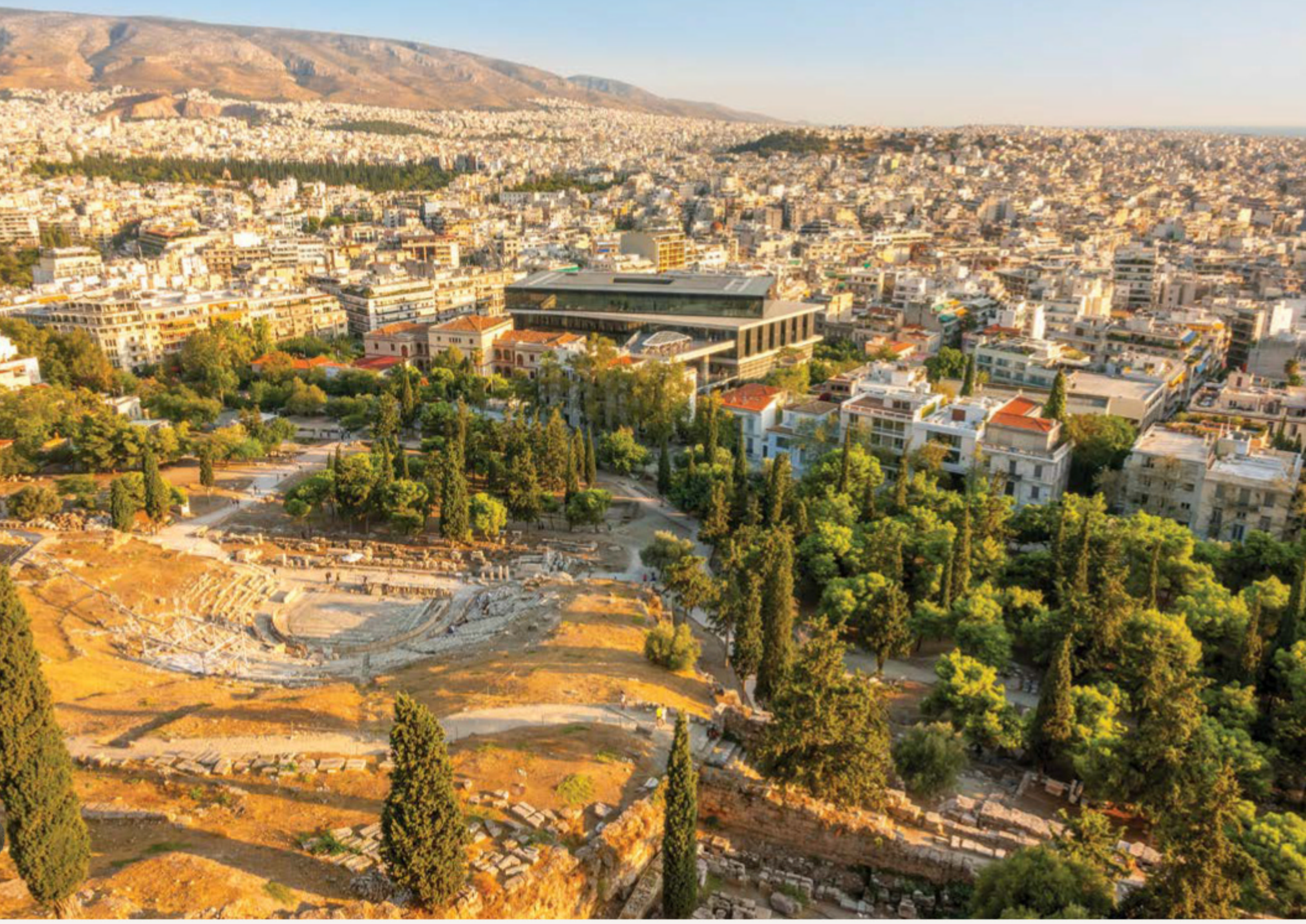

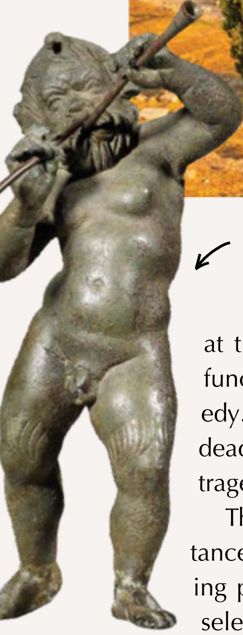

A Hellenistic bronze statuette of Papposilenos playing the *aulos*, dated to the third – second century BC.

© The Walters Art Museum

at the same time they also have the function of taking the sting out of tragedy. In comedy, actions do not have deadly serious outcomes as they do in tragedy or in real life.

The tragic tetralogies were distanced from the audience by presenting plays set in the mythological past selecting episodes from, for example, the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts, the Trojan War, or the royal family of Thebes. The material was rich, and the myths may have been familiar but the playwright could display his artistry in the way in which he allowed the story to unfold.

Even though the tragedies were set in the mythological past, they still had the capacity to invite the audience to reflect on contemporary concerns. The *Oresteia* trilogy, staged in 458 BC and composed by the tragic playwright Aeschylus, prompted reflection on recent political reforms. The link between the past and the present was made by ‘anachronistically’ allowing characters within the trilogy to act as jurors in the same way as the citizens in the audience would.

The playing space

The performance space was relatively simple. The surviving fourth-century theatre in Epidaurus (in the Peloponnese, Greece) gives a good idea of both the scale and configuration of the space. In the fifth-century theatre of Dionysus in Athens, the seating would have been made up of wooden benches. The flat performance space at the foot of the benches was called the *orchestra*. Assumed by most to be circular, it was the domain for the chorus from their first entrance to their exit at the end of the play. At the back of the playing space was a building with a low stage set in front of it. There were two ‘wings’, for entrances and exits, either side of the building.

Within the world of the play, the building at the back of the stage could come to represent a palace (in tragedy) or it might represent a more ordinary dwelling (in comedy). The audience could not see into the building to see any action taking place within, and so there were two conventions to mediate this challenge. The messenger speech was used to describe events that took place off-stage. These intense and dramatic speeches, with their heightened poetry and vivid descriptions, allowed actors to display

The Theatre of Dionysus can still be seen on the south slope of the Acropolis today, in the heart of Athens.

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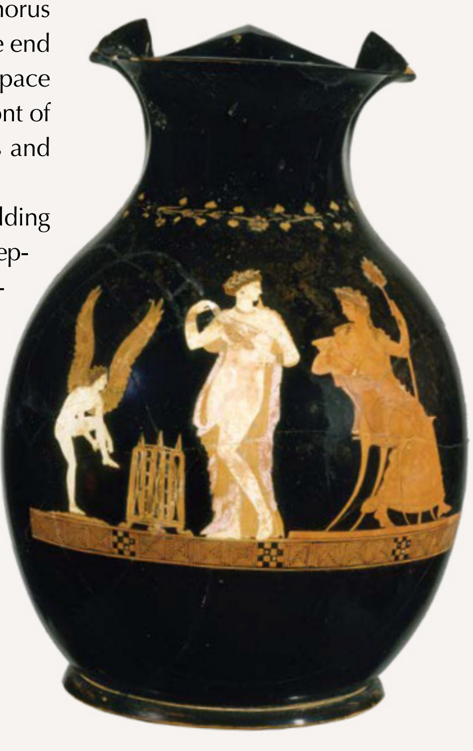
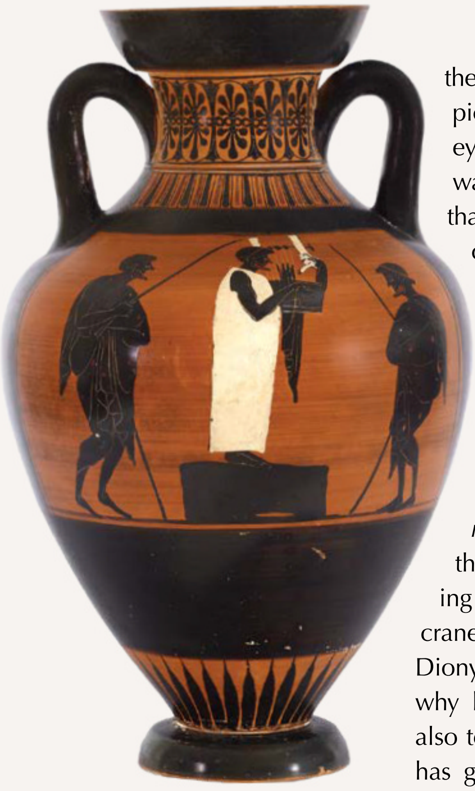
An Attic, terracotta *oinochoe* (jug), dated to the mid-fourth century BC, depicting Pompe, the personification of the procession, looking at a seated Dionysus, with a winged Eros behind her.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A Roman gold ring with carnelian intaglio dated to the late third – early second century BC. The engravng depicts Hieronymus standing amongst his trophies and with an animal to sacrifice in honor of his success after his first conquest of Thebes.

© The University of Pennsylvania Art Museum



The Dionysia included musical competitions, just as at the Panathenaea festival. This black-figure Pseudo-Panathenaic amphora dates to ca. 500 - 485 BC and depicts such a musical competition with a bearded man standing on a podium and playing the cithara.

© The Walters Ar Museum

their virtuosity and invited the audience to picture the violent actions in their mind's eye. The second important convention was the use of the *ekkyklema* – a platform that rolled out from the double doors at the centre of the building. It could display a tableau, such as the corpse of a character killed off-stage. The violence took place inside, but the audience looked upon the aftermath.

A different kind of stage machinery allowed the full use of the vertical playing space, i.e. the sky. This was the *mechane* (stage crane). It was used for the purpose of divine epiphanies, presenting a *deus ex machina* (a god from the stage crane). In the *Bacchae*, for example, the god Dionysus appears at the end to tell everyone why he has punished the royal house. He also tells them their future fate. Aristophanes has great fun with this stage machinery in his comedy *Peace*. He parodies the flight of Pegasus (the winged horse) up to the heavens in tragedy, presenting instead the magnificent comic substitute of a giant dung beetle flying up on the *mechane*!

Performing

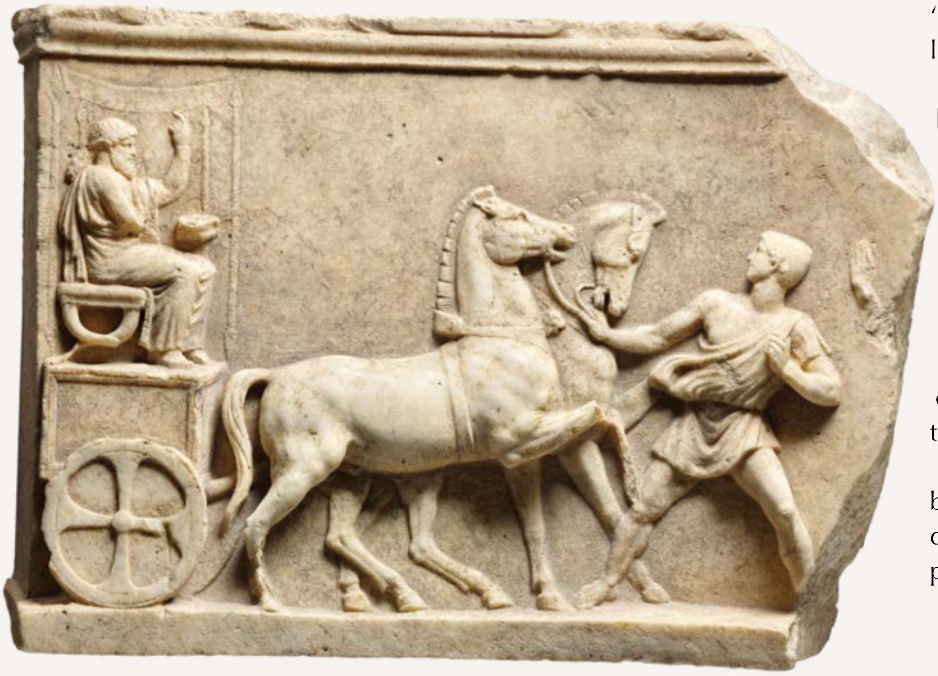
Training for the competition was a serious business, especially for the tragic choruses – the same performers sang and danced through four plays consecutively. Choral songs broke up the action of the plays, allowing for reflection on scenes and often filling in some of the backstory. These songs were physically demanding as they were performed by a group of twelve (or later fifteen) chorus members, lined up and dancing synchronously. Moreover, the performers wore 'helmet' masks (covering the whole head), which limited the peripheral vision, adding to the challenge of moving together. It is little wonder that it took months for choruses to train.

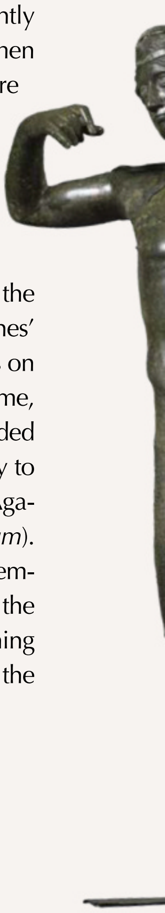
The brief for actors was equally demanding since in tragedy the parts were shared between only three male performers. The use of masks allowed these actors to take on the role of female characters. The demands made on these actors in terms of verbal precision is nicely illustrated in an anecdote about an actor fluffing his line. Hegelochus, the unfortunate actor in question, mispronounced one syllable in a word, resulting in his tragic line about seeing a 'calm' sea (line 279 in Euripides' *Orestes*) becoming inadvertently comic: his mispronunciation substituted 'calm' with 'weasel'. Part of how we know about the incident is that Hegelochus becomes the subsequent butt of a joke in comedy because of it (Aristophanes' *Frogs* 303–304).

The audience could be a tough crowd. This seems a fair assessment from the line in a comedy about wishing to have wings to escape the boredom of certain tragic choruses (Aristophanes *Birds*, 785–789). A pressing but unanswerable question is whether the audience included women. The evidence is ambiguous. A case can be made both for and against. One of the factors that is taken into consideration is whether the event is seen predominantly as a religious occasion (in which case women could likely participate) or civic and therefore 'political' (in which case women were likely excluded). The debate rages on.

A marble piece of a triangular base with a relief depicting the statue of Dionysus being transported to a festival or sanctuary in a ritual procession.

© The J. Paul Getty Museum

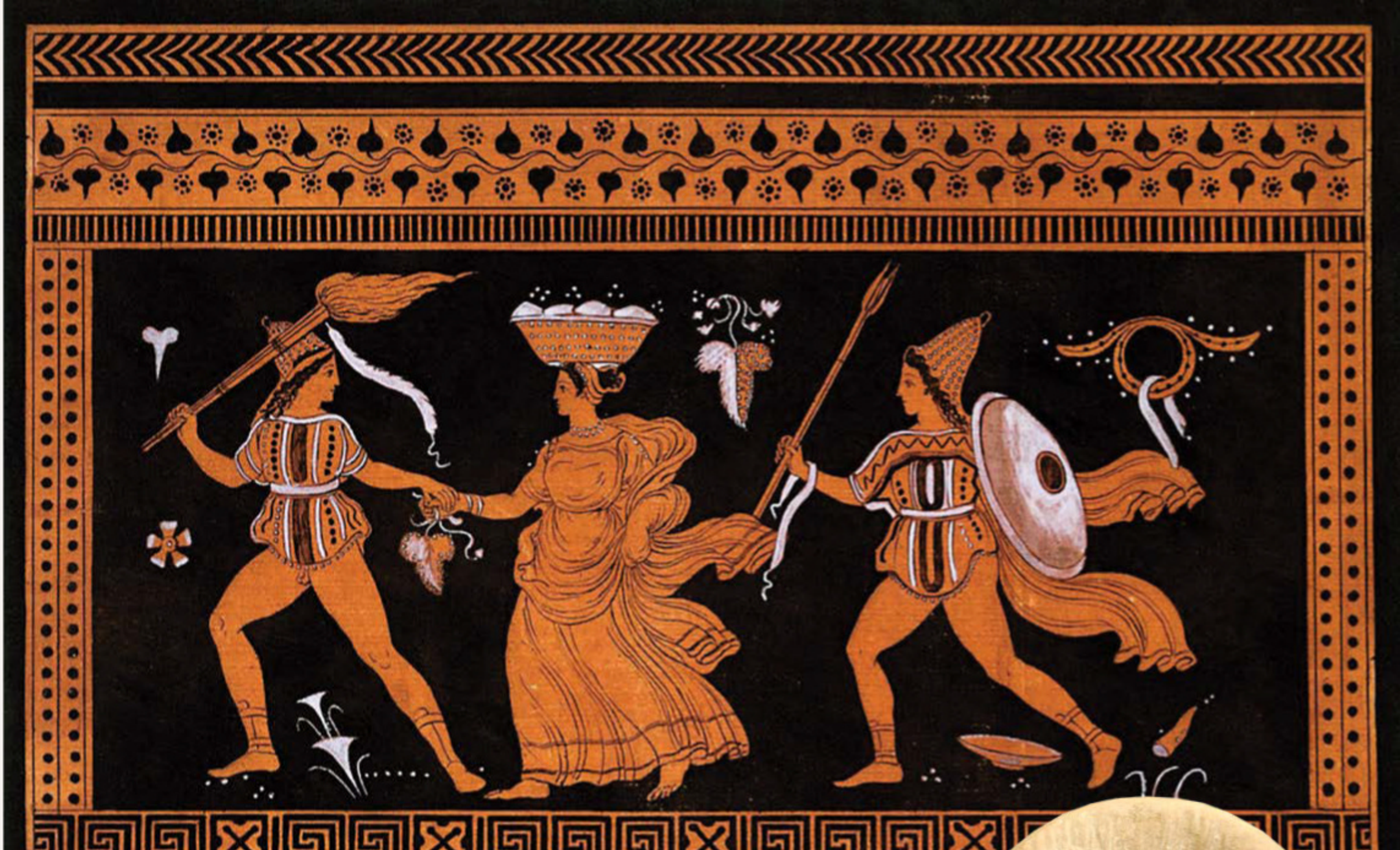




Lasting glory

The prize for victory was, above all, glory. We know how much it meant to the competing playwrights from Aristophanes' affront at being placed last (he comments on this in his comedy *Wasps*). At the same time, the sweetness of winning is usefully recorded in the famous account of the drinking party to celebrate the success of the playwright, Agathon, with his first tragedy (Plato's *Symposium*).

The productions would also be remembered in the year that followed through the dedication of the masks used in the winning plays at the sanctuary of Dionysus (beside the



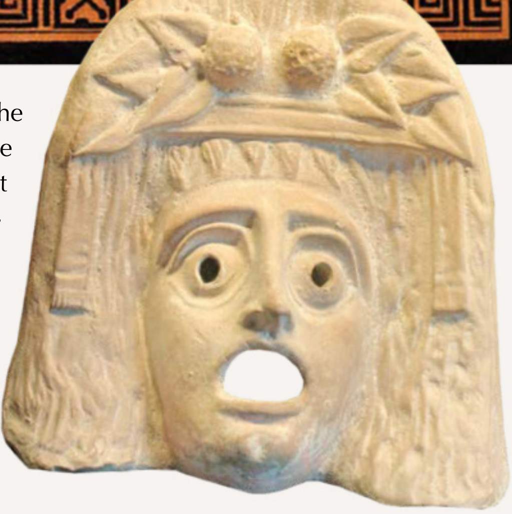
theatre). Here visitors to the city would learn of the production even if they had not watched it. Eventually lists of the victors for each year were inscribed. These lists survive on the Parian Marble and they provide crucial evidence, especially when we want to establish the popularity of a playwright or determine which tragic plays were performed together.

Performances of the fifth-century plays as well as newly written plays continued into the fourth century BC. Troupes of actors, known as the Artists of Dionysus, took productions across the Graeco-Mediterranean world. There is already evidence for the spread of the artform in the fifth century BC with the tragic playwright Aeschylus visiting Sicily and writing a commissioned piece (*Women of Etna*) and Euripides doing the same at the court in Macedon. Vase paintings from the fourth century BC show the popularity of Athenian drama in South Italy and Sicily. There is even evidence that Alexander the Great took performers with him on campaign for his amusement in the camp.

The legacy of ancient Greek drama can be further mapped in its influence on Roman playwrights. Above all, and most famously, we might think about the tragic plays written by Seneca. These re-worked the material of the ancient Greek playwrights. From the Renaissance onwards, these plays have been rediscovered and reperformed.

It is extraordinary to think that plays that were first composed well over 2000 years ago are still able to resonate with us today. Aristophanes' comedies address contemporary concerns that we share, calling out political corruption and incompetence, hypocrisy, injustice, and warmongering. Meanwhile, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides reflect on the dangers of power, the impact of loss, and the complexity of both family and interstate relationships. These plays enjoy performances across the globe in the original, in translation, and in adaptations, keeping the legacy of ancient theatre alive for generations to come. **AH**

***Dr Rosie Wyles, Senior Lecturer of Classical History and Literature at the University of Kent, is the author of* Costume in Greek Tragedy *and* Theatre Props and Civic Identity in Athens, 458–405 BC.**



(Top) A coloured engraving made by Pierre d'Hancarville (1787) representing a vase-painting of two men accompanying a woman with a basket on her head, presumably a *thiasos*: a drunken procession of followers of Dionysus.

© The Wellcome Collection

(Bottom) A terracotta theatrical mask representing Dionysus, dated to ca. 200 - 1 BC. Masks were a large part of the worship of Dionysus, and his cult statue would have had a similar mask on it during the procession of the City Dionysia in Athens.

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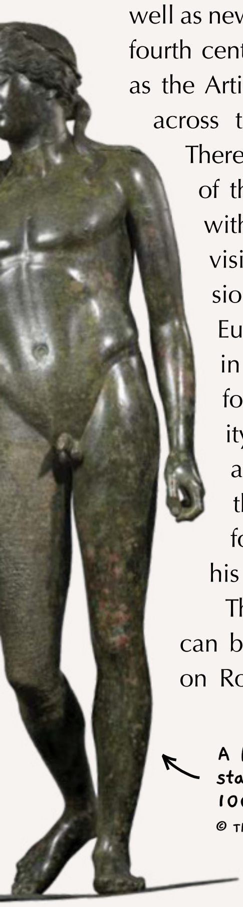
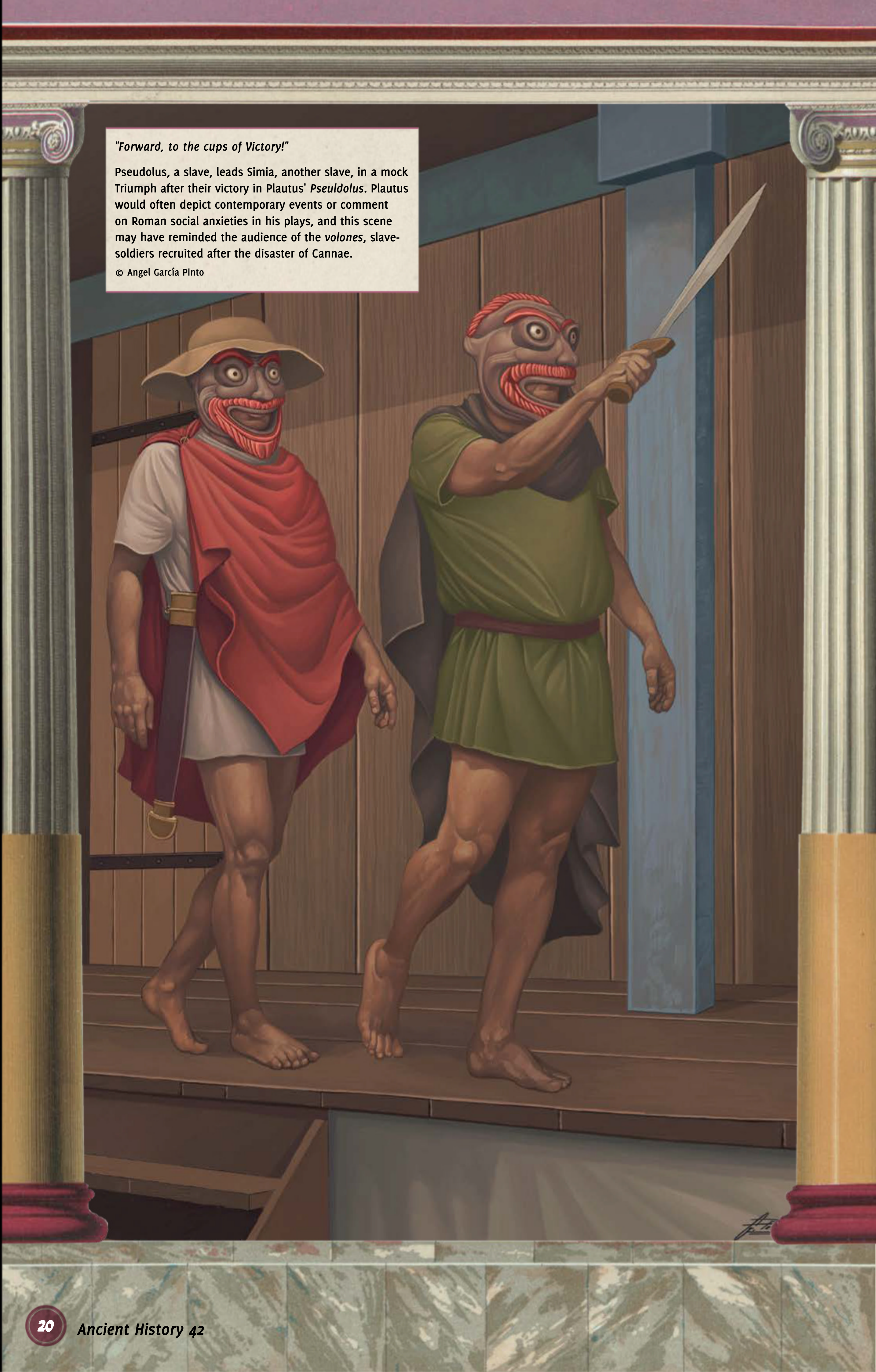


A Hellenistic or Roman period bronze statue of a young Dionysus, dated to 100 BC – AD 100.

© The Art Institute of Chicago



"Forward, to the cups of Victory!"

Pseudolus, a slave, leads Simia, another slave, in a mock Triumph after their victory in Plautus' *Pseuldolus*. Plautus would often depict contemporary events or comment on Roman social anxieties in his plays, and this scene may have reminded the audience of the *volones*, slave-soldiers recruited after the disaster of Cannae.

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THEME

REPUBLICAN ROMAN THEATRE

POLITICS IN PLAUTUS

By Camilla Tosi

Plautus, a playwright of the late third century BC, published a great many comedic plays for performance in Rome, often reworking older Greek comedies to suit his Roman audience. Just like his Greek predecessors, Plautus did not shy away from highlighting the contemporary anxieties of Roman society, often referencing politicians and wars. In Plautus' surviving plays, we can see the theatrical atmosphere of mid-Republican Rome.

Between the third and second centuries BC, Rome experienced a complex historical phase. Clashes with Carthage, expansion towards the north and east, and the conquest of southern Italy, an area colonized by the Greeks, brought about numerous changes, from the adoption of the Greek theatrical tradition to being the head of a territorial empire fraught with complications.

The socio-political context of Plautus' plays

After conquering a large part of the Italian peninsula through the reduction of Sicily to a province (241 BC), and after defeating the ancient eastern powers of Macedonia and its allies (200–197 BC), the Aetolians (189 BC), and Syria (192–189 BC), the Roman state extended its dominion as far as Asia Minor, thus succeeding in subjugating, in various forms, the major antagonistic powers of the eastern Mediterranean.

Already, in the archaic period, the Romans had had contact with the Greeks through trade with the cities of Magna Graecia and through the people of Etruria with whom the Greeks had a long trade relationship. In Etruria, as in Latium and Rome, Greek ceramics dating back to the seventh to sixth centuries BC have been found in large quantities. However, Roman culture adopted a great deal from the Greeks after the victory over Pyrrhus at Beneventum (275 BC) and the Carthaginians in Sicily.

Theatre as a political occasion

Theatre in Rome, in its literary forms as we know it, was indebted to Greek theatre. However, it should not be thought that it was only imitation theatre or that it had little importance in the daily life of the Romans, even though it was undoubtedly the fruit of an artistic elaboration born of the need to adapt to the culture of the Greeks.

When we speak of early Roman theatre, we must think neither of a predefined place, nor of written texts that were performed. The Roman idea of theatre is very different from that of our times, given the significance they attached to music and staging, which was often more important than the text itself.

Additionally, in Roman civilization, the theatrical perception was not limited to the stage. Everything could become spectacle: judicial debates, civil war struggles, a young woman asleep, or the execution of a criminal. It is to this sense of theatricality, that the coexistence of solemn moments and carnivalesque moments in various circumstances of Roman life should be referred. There could have been theatrical performances on the occasions of war triumphs, for instance, or the funerals of important figures. On these occasions, as during weddings, ceremonies with a complex ritual linked to religious elements were planned; these were accompanied by processions in which the community participated, with dancing and singing mostly of a comic tenor.

In addition to 'private' occasions, i.e. concerning moments in an individual's life, there were numerous 'public' ones, mostly linked to religious festivals, during which public activities were suspended. The Romans staged games of various kinds, events originally intended to amuse the gods: horse races, animal fights, athletic competitions. These public festivals, which had a core of religious ceremonies, were the so-called *ludi*, traditionally and inadequately translated as 'games'.

To the sphere of games also belonged the theatrical spectacles, called *ludi scaenici*, distinguished by the stage (*scaena*) where the artists performed. Indeed, if the *ludi* were divided between the circus and the stage, for a long time there were more days devoted to the latter. Under the Republic, 55 out of 77 official *ludi* days were for the *ludi scaenici*. The amount of time spent at the theatre by an average citizen in Rome was enormous, especially when compared to the infrequent theatrical performances in Greece.

The history of Roman theatre is internal to a cultural-political history of the *ludi*, parallel with the political-institutional history of the city. The Roman festival should therefore be understood as the matrix of the spectacle. A Roman first experienced the time of the public festival and then, within this, the time of the theatre. In Roman culture, the meaning and function of theatre are never separable from the meaning and function of the festival in which it occurred.

Plautus and the political class

The lack of sources concerning Plautus' biography prevents us from reconstructing the exact relationship between the poet and the Roman political class. Explicit references to members of the different classes and political factions are lacking in his comedies. Although numerous solutions to this problem have been proposed over the years, scholars do not agree on who the playwright's official *patronus* was.

The subject is divided between those who saw him in the service of the Scipio clan and those who frame him in the movement of Catonian conservatism. It has been suggested that Plautus was either a subordinate or an opponent of Scipio. Some scholars suggest a change of political preference and a consequent shift from Scipio's pro-Hellenism to Catonian conservatism. It has been proposed that Plautus had an ambiguous attitude towards the Scipio clan.

Regarding Plautus' ideology, one finds greater clarity in the last decade of the poet's life: the position regarding the *Senatus consultum* of the *Bacchanalia*, the 'anti-Scipionic turn' on the part of the Senate and the ruling class, and the growing fame and influence of Cato suggest an increasingly strong adherence to more conservative ideals. This point emerges in the finale of the *Captivi*. The bloody repression of the *Bacchanalia* undoubtedly had a political background, such as opposition to the Hellenizing pressure of the Scipio clan, or fear of subversive propaganda – either of other Italian peoples or of foreigners, such as the Hellenistic monarchies – behind the screen of ritual secrecy.

Communication with the audience

Plautus was a much-loved author, capable of arousing laughter and entertaining through jokes with immediate effect. One of the expedients he used in his theatre was to reveal the theatrical fiction to the audience itself, presenting the tricks and demands of the theatre as if they were a game.

This approach to the audience arose from Plautus' frequentation of popular plays – the *atellanae* – in which the audience was often involved by the actors in direct participation in the stage action, through jokes and even improvised mottos.

Plautus' ability to entertain his audience, alternating moments of jest and of reflection, is effective not only for his contemporaries, but also for subsequent generations of readers. Above all, it is the ability to put in place a system of information dissemination that allows the broadcaster to reach, as quickly as possible, the entire social body or particular sections of it, and in any case the entire group of recipients of the message.

The author used cultural stereotypes derived from archaic performances as playful and celebratory occasions: the masks, music, dances, and mottos fit well into the scenes. This technique emphasises the Italic and, specifically, Roman character of Plautus' comedy.

This style involved the strengthening of popular consensus, and therefore political support, through the entertainment dearest to the public – comedy, derived from Italic farce – and is well represented on stage by Plautus' characters.

Social composition of Plautus' audience

Plautus presented the content of his plays in the same way to two different categories of spectators: the 'low' audience, the largest segment of the population, i.e. women, slaves, children, and social categories often lacking in cultural knowledge, if not illiterate; and the 'high' audience, the smaller segment of the population, educated and literate, part of the ruling class or those dedicated to trade and civic, political, and economic affairs. However, these two distinct social groups should not be thought of as separate, as, although different, they were part of the same theatre audience.

Certainly not all in the audience were able to grasp the technical allusions, the references to Greek models, or the political and social implications of certain lines. Already in earlier literary production there were occasions and productions intended for a more restricted audience: this is the case, for instance, of those works that Ennius composed for the Roman elite. Nevertheless, Plautus' comedies offered effective parodies, exotic scenarios, foreign customs, and verbal and gestural comedy that struck a chord with the audience.

The 'low' audience is sensitive to the most varied forms of entertainment and frequents the theatre above all to be entertained. What they appreciated in Plautus, therefore, were his engaging performances, full of masks and stereotypical models – such as the annoying and powerful wife, the incapable and submissive husband, the intelligent slave, and the adolescent in love – which the audience appreciated for their liveliness.

However, the occasion for entertainment also offers occasions for thought and learning, as the audience can observe situations created with possibly strong ideological overtones: in fact, the scenes, dialogues, and characters are instrumentalized to encourage the audience to reflect on the ideals of Roman tradition. This is therefore an audience amongst whom the ruling class consciously intervenes, through an ideological programme that lends authority to Plautus' stage.

The 'high' audience, on the other hand, is interested not only in entertainment, but also in the implementation of a spectator awareness programme with regard to propaganda. This circle frequents the theatre and directly observes the needs and moods of the plebs; it sees the reactions to Plautus' dynamics, according to the parameters of different ages, sexes, and social backgrounds. It also understands how topics and situations, often alluding to contemporary social or historical realities, such as war, are received on stage. The Roman community present at the theatre, by participating in the performances, contributed, sometimes unconsciously, to civic occasions aimed at further strengthening Roman propaganda.

Political anxieties within Plautus

During the third century BC, the powerful members of the circle around the Scipiones gave them a boost in their rise to the role of Rome's economic leaders. An important role is in fact played by the commercial activities of the members of the plebeian class, which also find numerous recurrences in the technical lexicon.

Plautus' protagonists are engaged in transactions and in each of the twenty-one plays there are numerous scenes in which the characters are engaged with freedmen, merchants, and businessmen. This suggests the existence of speculative activities that encouraged the development of the business class even within Rome. Specific terms related to the world of maritime trade and various exchange activities often recur.

Additionally, the playwright paid close attention to the world of war of his day, alluding to contemporary characters and conflicts, but which clash or historical character he refers to each time is not known for certain. Unlike other contemporary authors, however, such as, for example, Ennius, Plautus does not engage at all in celebrating the heroic deeds of Roman commanders, or the victories they achieved, and concerned himself even less with belittling the enemy, listing new conquests, or imagining future developments in battles. If one compares, for instance, the production of Ennius with that of Plautus, one can see how the former, who was part of Scipio's circle, constantly used a positive light to portray his patron, who was notoriously busy conquering territories and subjugating populations. Plautus stands in perfect contrast.

Plautus' comedy of the *Captivi* is perhaps the most interesting, as it is a clear reference to the conflict with the Aetolians. The Parasite informs the audience of the fate of Philopolemus of Aetolia, who has fallen into enemy hands in Elis. The allusion to the conflict has opened a debate on the dating of the play. It has been proposed that the play is a veiled reference to the conflict between Carthage and Rome, dating the poem to 198 BC. If, on the other hand, one considers the Second Macedonian War, one should ask what nuances the involvement of the Aetolians might take on. The author might allude to the unfolding of the war and thus propose a behavioural model preferable to the Aetolian-Macedonian one. He could also, however, draw similar conclusions after the war was over. The date of 191 BC, when the Aetolian population was defeated at Thermopylae during the Second Macedonian War against Antiochus III of Syria, therefore remains the most plausible. Even the name Philopolemus, which means 'lover of war', might be a critique of the war-prone nature of Rome's relations with their neighbours in Plautus' day.

Other comedies, such as *Amphitryon*, for instance, or *Miles Gloriosus*, also contain specific references to magistrates, legal institutions, or technical vocabulary belonging to the so-called *res militaris* ('military matters').

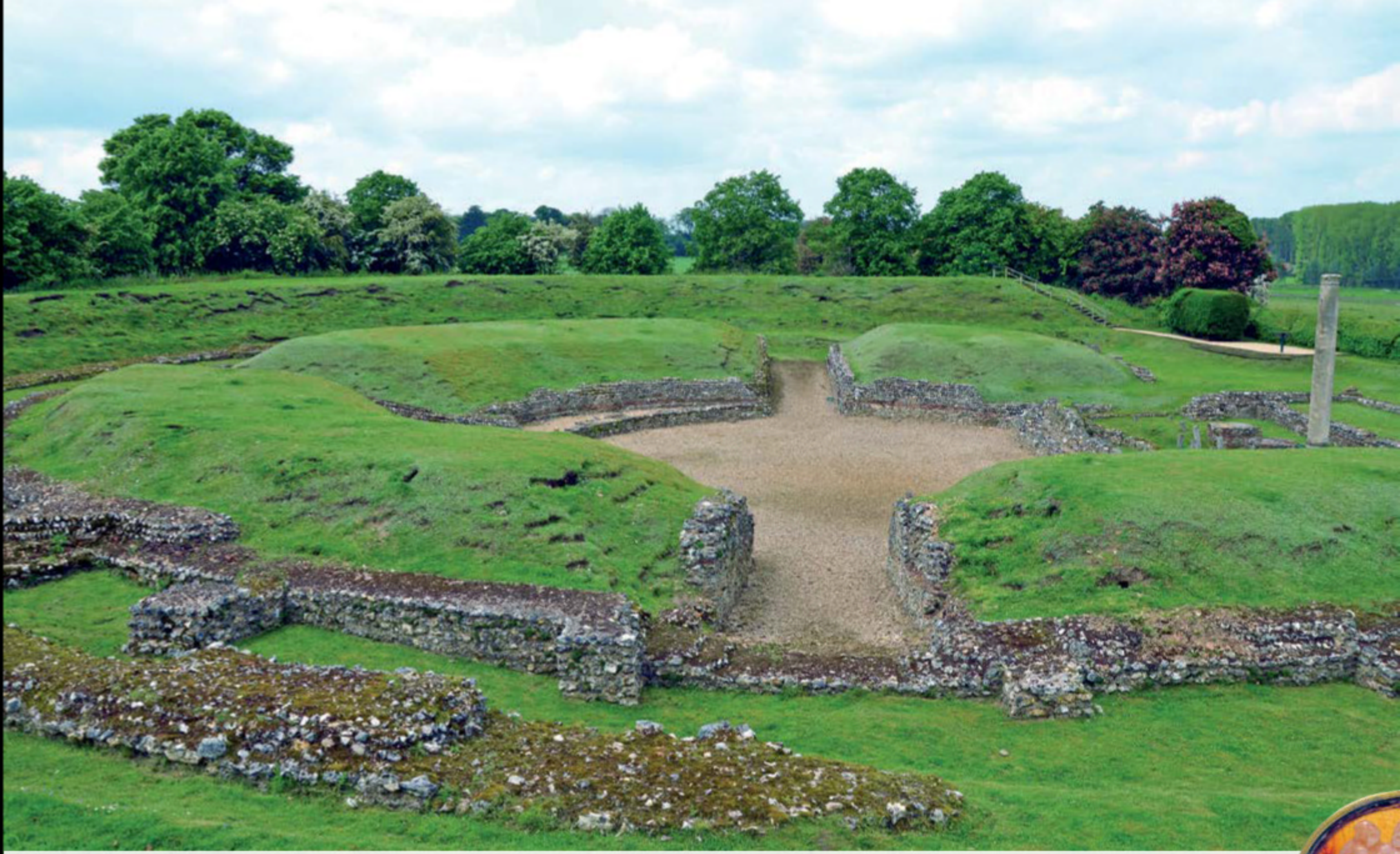
Cato's anti-Hellenism and Nobilior's policy in the war against the Ambraciots confirm an anti-Scipionic opposition with which Plautus himself might have been, if not sided with, at least sympathetic towards. This is demonstrated by the playwright's clear detachment from Ennius, who was rather in line with the attitude held during the Aetolian campaign by his commander and patron. Plautus criticises Ennius with numerous allusions, more or less explicit, just as Cato rebukes Nobilior for his abuse of his literary subordinate, who was busy celebrating his exploits. This, therefore, is poetry of a private nature: a literary patron, with an active role in foreign policy and Roman society, who financed an author not so much to glorify the Republic, but rather its successes.

Conclusion

The *ludi* were the collective occasions in which the life – ethical, political, and religious – of the city sought, and albeit amid many difficulties, found, in a spectacular and ritualistic guise at the same time, its 'official' meaning. Now, in spite of Greek custom, Plautus' comedy was nothing more than the comically deformed mirroring of that city life, attacked in its emphatic – and therefore, at least in part, hypocritical – exterior.

The situations that Plautus stages are not mythological or nostalgic like those proposed by his contemporaries, such as Ennius. Unlike tragedies, which focus on Greek stories and often surreal events, Plautus' comedies bring the everyday to the stage, focusing on contemporary events. In doing so, he encouraged his audience, both 'high' and 'low', to think critically about Roman culture: about how they saw the world, and how the world saw the Romans. Each citizen was given an opportunity to rethink their own hypocrisies and those of their peers. AH

Camilla Tosi teaches at the University of Bologna and has written several publications about traditions of the ancient world. Her research is focused on Latin Literature.



The theatre of Verulamium, southwest of St Albans, was built around AD 140. It is the best preserved Roman theatre that still survives today in Britain.

THEME

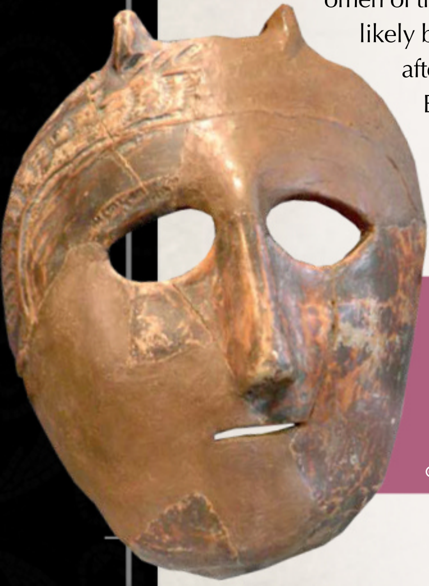
DRAMA AT THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

THEATRE IN ROMAN BRITAIN

By Jo Ball

Live theatre was a popular leisure activity for people in the Roman world, and one that spread to many of the provinces. Britain, on the edge of the Empire, was no exception. Although theatre in Roman Britain is largely undocumented, a range of archaeological finds, from the remains of theatres to theatrical props, provide some insight into Roman-British attitudes to the dramatic arts.

Theatre appears to have been introduced to Britain relatively soon after the Roman invasion under Claudius (AD 43). Tacitus mentions that a theatre had been built in the Roman colony of Camulodunum, the first provincial capital of Britain, which in AD 60/61 “rang with shrieks” in an omen of the forthcoming revolt of Boudica. The theatre was likely built in the AD 50s, potentially less than a decade after the Romans had gained a foothold in southern England. By the second century AD theatres had been constructed in a number of Roman towns, suggesting that there was a demand for live entertainment within the province, although perhaps less so than in other areas of the Empire. Theatre shows would have provided a leisure-time alternative to the more brutal sports entertainments such as gladiatorial fights, boxing matches, and perhaps chariot races, which would have taken place at other venues within the province, particularly amphitheatres.



This Roman cult or theatre mask was found at Catterick Bridge, North Yorkshire, and dates between AD 43-410.
© Carole Raddato / Flickr

Known theatres

There were probably far more theatres in Britain than we have identified to date. Stone-built theatres have been identified at Canterbury, Verulamium, Colchester, Gosbecks Farm, and Leicester, and traces of structures that are likely to be theatres have also been identified in London and Cirencester. Many of them lay close to temples or shrines, suggesting that religious activity may also have taken place on the stages.

The theatre at Verulamium, a short distance southwest of modern-day St Albans, is the best-preserved example from Roman Brit-

© Przemysław Sakrajda / Wikimedia Commons

ain and is thought to be the only theatre in the province built to the classical 'Roman' design seen elsewhere in the Empire. Verulamium was the third-largest town in Britain, making it unsurprising that it benefitted from a number of civic amenities. The theatre was constructed ca. AD 140, on top of a pre-Roman shrine, and continued to be linked to religious activity, with a secret shrine to an unknown deity within the structure. The theatre could seat several thousand spectators – a significant crowd, but probably smaller than the population of the entire town. There were shops and storage spaces within the theatre structure, probably occupied by blacksmiths and bronze workers, based on finds within these areas. There were likely also sleeping quarters within the theatre – perhaps providing accommodation for some of the actors? By the later fourth century AD, however, the theatre appears to have fallen into disuse, and it lay buried until it was rediscovered in 1869 and excavated in the 1930s.

A Roman cameo, dated between AD 140–180, depicting a theatrical performance.

© Sailko / Wikimedia Commons

However, there is a curious absence of theatres in other major towns in Britain. In some, such as Bath, Gloucester, and York, it is often assumed that there must once have been a theatre there, with all traces of it lost due to subsequent land development. Yet this is not necessarily the case. Excavations at some prominent Romano-British towns, particularly Wroxeter and Silchester, have failed to uncover any traces of theatres, despite the archaeology being largely undisturbed since antiquity. This absence suggests that a dedicated stone-built structure was not an amenity automatically built in every settlement. This does not necessarily mean that the population of these communities went without live theatre though; performances were perhaps staged in timber-built theatres that have left no trace behind. There are several references to timber theatres and amphitheatres in the Roman historical record, such as the Amphitheatre of Nero in Rome, which was an entirely wooden structure.

The case for timber theatres being constructed in Britain is strengthened by the discovery, at several sites that do not have a known theatre, of archaeological evidence for the performance of plays and pantomimes, particularly theatrical staging kit. Terracotta stage masks have been excavated from a number of sites, including London, Caerleon, Baldock, Catterick, and Wilderspool. These items were not found in areas associated with a theatre, and it is likely that they belonged to a group of travelling actors who put on plays in these places. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that any traces of wooden theatres from Roman Britain will survive in the archaeological record

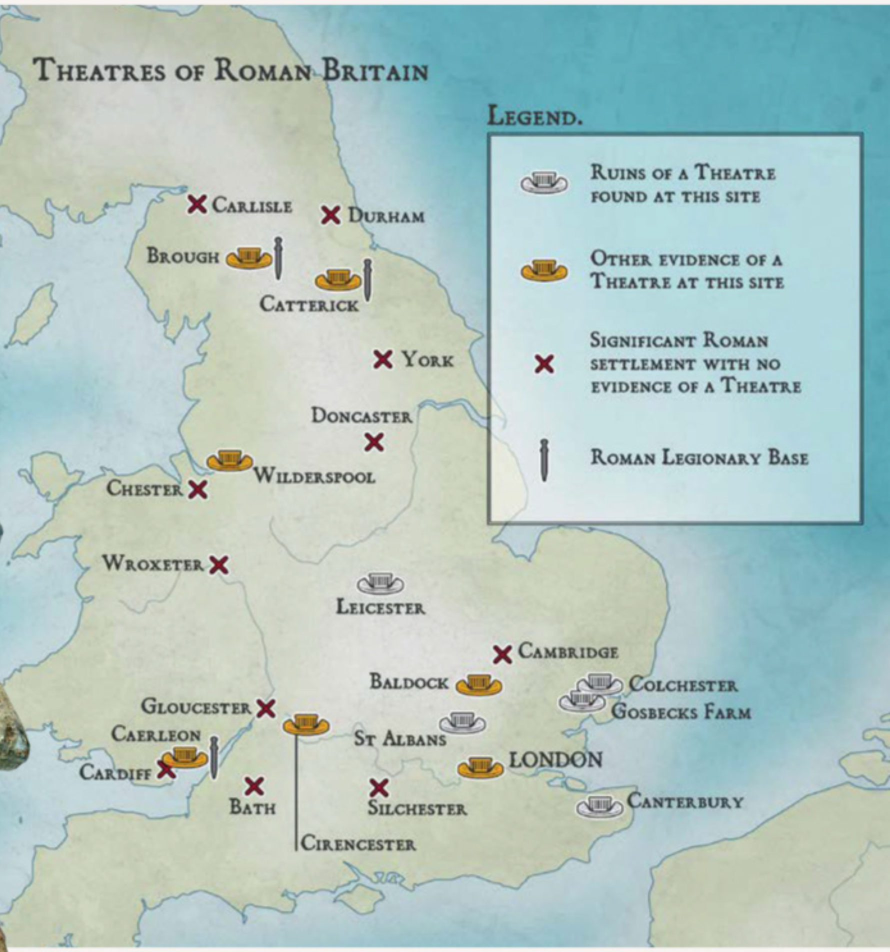
Almost all the identified stone theatres in Britain are found in the southern areas of the province, where the population was predominantly civilian. The military communities in the north may still have been entertained by live theatre, but if so, it was almost certainly staged in nearby amphitheatres. That said, theatres were evidently not entirely absent from the northern reaches of the province. A dedication stone found at Brough in the East Riding of Yorkshire commemorates the construction of a new stage for the town's theatre during the

This cast lead-alloy figurine, from Langar cum Barnstone in Nottinghamshire, is thought to represent a clown or acrobat. It is unknown if this is a genuine Roman artefact.

© The Portable Antiquities Scheme

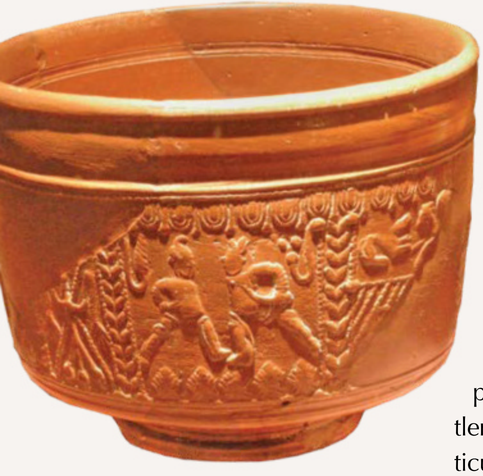
Found in Britain, this Roman oil lamp, roughly dated to ca. AD 71-410, has what may be a depiction of a theatrical mask at its centre.

© York Museums Trust



A map depicting the distribution of theatres and archaeological finds suggesting the presence of theatres, as well as significant Roman settlements and legionary bases. The majority of the evidence for theatres comes from the southeast of England, the most heavily Romanized area of Britain.

© Richard Thomson



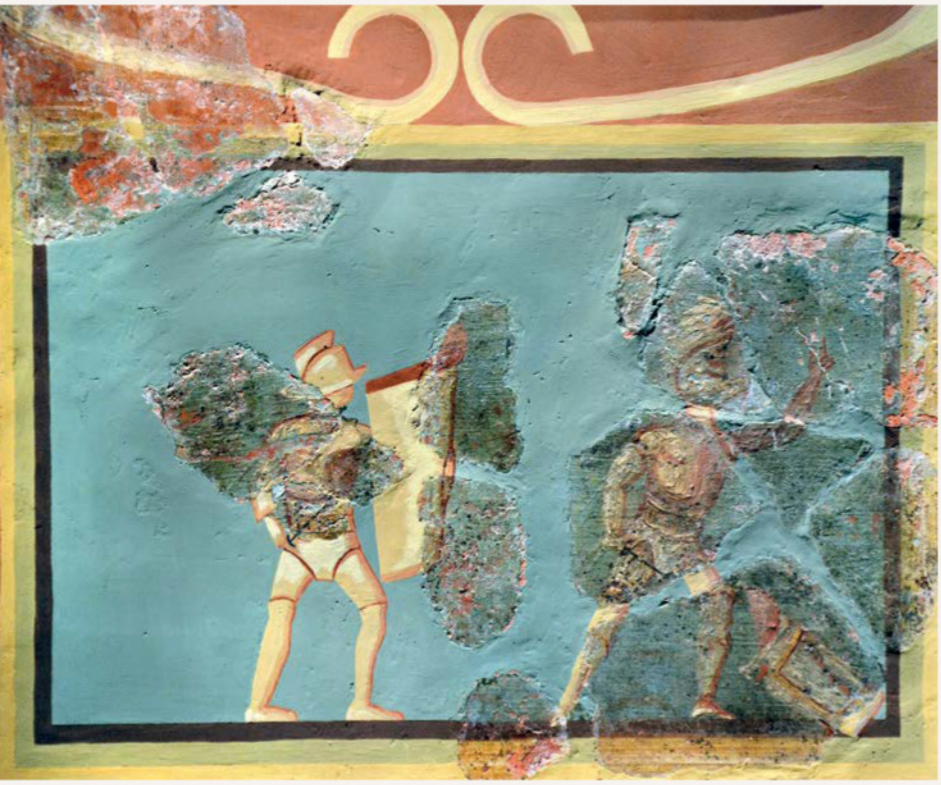
This Samian ware pot was found in Canterbury, one of the locations in Roman Britain where a theatre is known to have been. The relief depicts a gladiator fight, which often took place during the same events as stage productions.

© Linda Spashett / Wikimedia Commons

reign of Antoninus Pius. It was paid for by Marcus Ulpius Ianuarius, the settlement's aedile (financial magistrate). Although the theatre at Brough has never been found, the inscription suggests that it played an important role in the cultural life of the town – and funding it was an appropriate action for a generous local official. It is perhaps surprising to find a theatre in a settlement such as Brough, which was not a particularly important place – it was not an administrative centre, nor a territorial capital – when they seem to be absent in more prominent towns. The presence or absence of a permanent stone-built theatre may have been determined by something as basic as local attitudes or demand, or even whether the men holding the purse-strings were fans of the stage or not.

A largely reconstructed fresco depicting gladiators from Colchester, ancient Camulodunum, the first provincial capital of Britain and the site of the earliest Roman theatre in the province.

© Carole Raddato / Flickr



Entertainments and performances

The theatres in Britain would have staged a number of different types of show, such as plays – ranging from serious historical dramas down to comedic farces – and pantomimes, musical concerts, literary readings, and even gymnastic performances. Much of the material would have originated with the 'great' Greek and Roman authors and composers. They would almost certainly have been performed in Latin, which may have limited audience numbers in the earlier decades of provincial occupation, although the provincial population who spoke the language would have steadily increased over time. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether there would ever have been any local compositions on the bill, although it is possible – in the core of the Empire, many playwrights also performed in the plays they had written, suggesting that there was a potential for originality within the provinces.

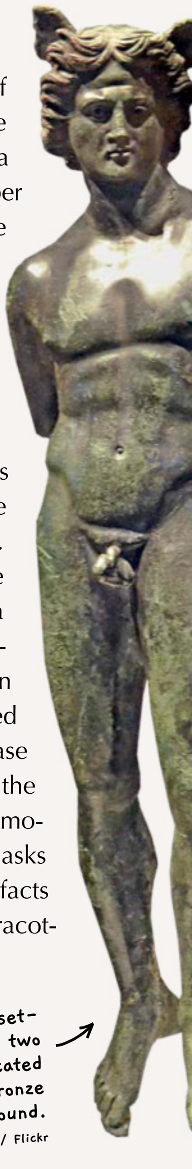
The performances were likely very entertaining, particularly the comedies, which appear to have been fairly lowbrow in content. Special effects were used on the stage to add to the drama or comedy – the biographer Suetonius records one performance where a character fell over and vomited blood, an effect staged by understudies.

The costs of staging live entertainment were largely borne by civic authorities rather than the population of towns. Elsewhere in the Empire, theatre shows were funded by the state treasury, or by wealthy individuals who wanted to gain popularity among the people, and Britain was likely no exception.

Theatre buffs

Some Romans became massive fans of theatre – the wealthiest might even maintain their own personal company of performers. A letter written by Pliny the Younger discusses the case of Numidia Quadratilla, a rich and respected member of the Roman elite, who spent her leisure hours watching them perform pantomimes; this was, admittedly, seen as not quite appropriate for a woman of her standing, although clearly Quadratilla did not care.

There is no evidence from Britain for someone keeping a troupe of actors in this way, but there clearly were some fans of the theatre within the province. Excavations of a Roman townhouse in Leicester uncovered fragments of a wall fresco depicting a tragic theatrical mask, a popular motif elsewhere in the Empire. A similar mask is depicted in a wall fresco from the legionary base in York, dating about 200 years after the Leicester example – this was clearly a motif with long-term popularity. Theatre masks are also found on a range of other artefacts discovered in Britain, including on terracot-



Colchester was a significant enough settlement in Roman Britain to warrant two theatres. The larger of the two, located at Gosbecks Farm, was where this bronze statuette of Mercury was found.

© Carole Raddato / Flickr

ta oil-lamps, Samian ware vessels, and even jewellery, in the case of an intaglio discovered at Housesteads Fort on Hadrian's Wall.

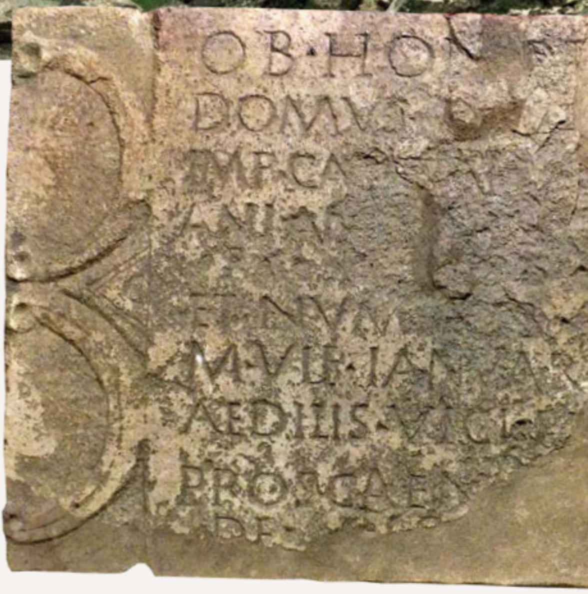
Actors in Britain

Despite the popularity of live theatre in the Roman world, the actors themselves were regarded as being of relatively low status. They were judged as being *infamis*, having lost elements of their legal and social status, putting them in the same category as gladiators and prostitutes. Nevertheless, some actors became famous and wealthy and were not ashamed of their profession, often recording it on their tombstones.

Only one actor in Roman Britain can be identified by name – and interestingly, it belongs to a female performer. Her name was scratched onto a small fragment of pottery uncovered during excavations in Leicester: Verecunda *ludia*, or "Verecunda the actress". The same piece also bears the name Lucius, whom the inscription identifies as a gladiator. It is not entirely clear what the purpose of this graffito was. One possibility is that Verecunda and Lucius were part of a travelling entertainment troupe, who would have moved around Britain presenting their performances wherever they would be well-received, and this small sherd of pottery was used to advertise their appearance in the town's theatre. Plays and gladiatorial combats were often performed as part of the same entertainment event, and it would be unsurprising to see these two featured on the same bill. Verecunda was almost certainly a pantomime actor, as this was the only stage role that was freely open to women, likely skilled in both acting and dancing. Perhaps she was one of the stars of Roman Britain, as famous then as Hollywood actors are now.

The evidence for theatre in Roman Britain is frustratingly fragmentary, and a definitive answer for how popular it was remains elusive. But the archaeological remains of several theatres suggests that such live entertainment was popular with at least part of the population and could likely be accessed throughout the province, even in timber theatres or on makeshift stages. Sadly, we may never know much more about the lives of actors such as Verecunda – but hopefully they were content with the pleasure and entertainment they brought their audiences. **AH**

Jo Ball is a regular contributor to* Ancient History *and* Ancient Warfare *magazines.

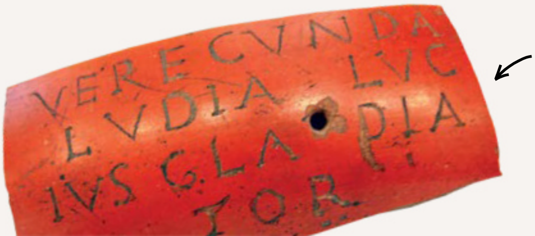


(Top) The ruins of a large bath complex can be found in Leicester where evidence of a theatre has also been attested. In this image a view of the ruins of the *thermae* can be seen, as well as Jewry Wall, which once separated the *Palaestra* and *frigidarium*.

© Purusothaman / Wikimedia Commons

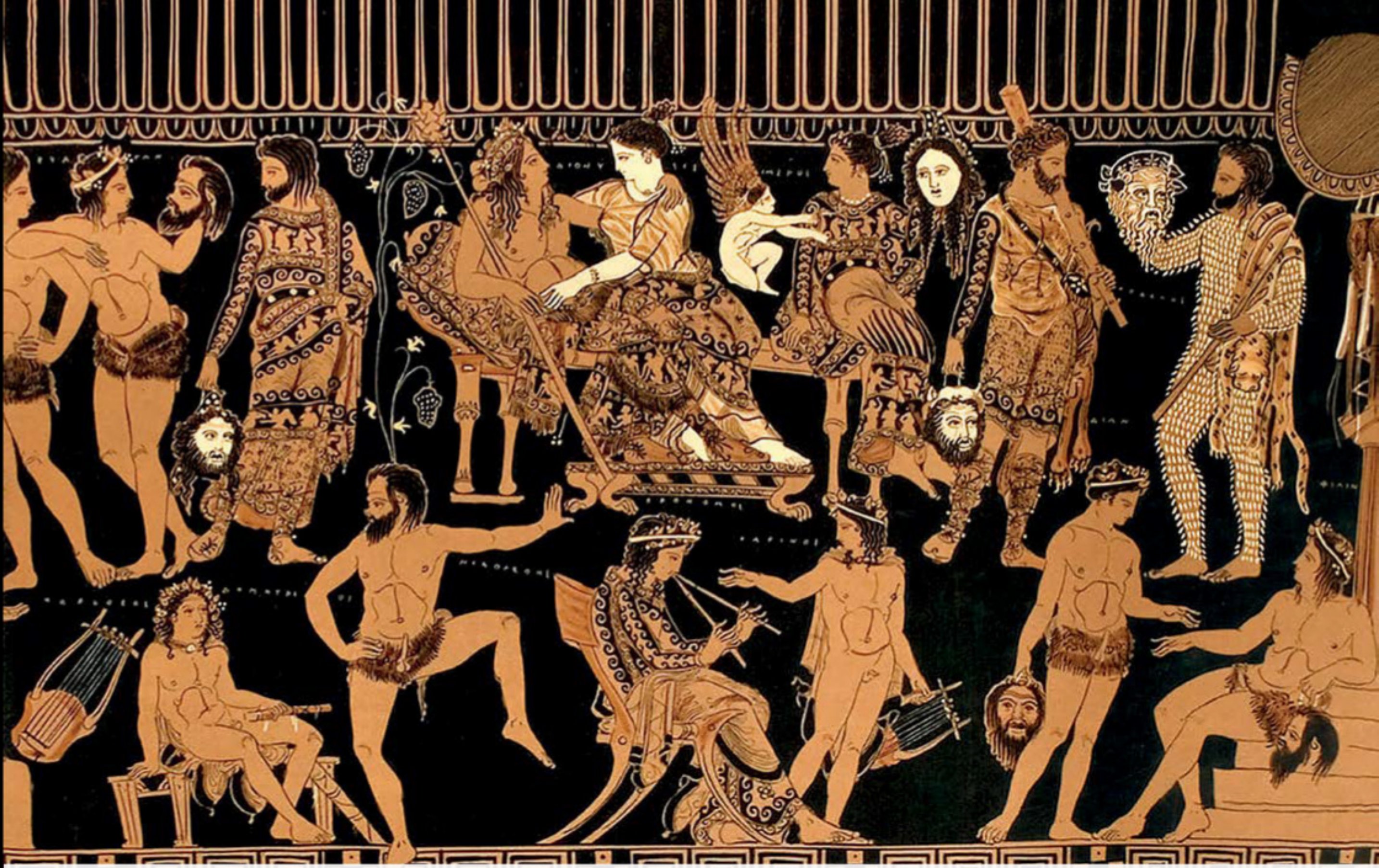
(Bottom) This insciption, dating to ca. AD 140 from Brough, near Hull, commemorates the construction of a new stage for the town's theatre, paid for by Marcus Ulpius Ianuarius, the town's aedile.

© Bernard Sharp / Wikimedia Commons



This fragment of pottery, found in Leicester and currently held in the Jewry Wall Museum, bears the names of Verecunda the actress and Lucius the gladiator. The potsherd may have been used to advertise their coming to Leicester.

© The Leicester Jewry Wall Museum



The visually striking Pronomos Vase, made in Athens and found in a tomb in Ruvo di Puglia, northern Apulia, depicts many actors gathered around a reclining Dionysus, the god of theatre (among other things), holding their masks, possibly at an after-show party.

THEME

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEATRE OF DIONYSUS

By Owain Williams

TENTS, TRAYS, AND CRANES

The Theatre of Dionysus is a famous landmark that exemplifies the Athenians' love of drama. However, the theatre was not simply a space to perform, but a space of great social importance, which may have begun as a simple open area in the agora.

The Athenians appear to have been unusually enamoured of the theatre when compared to other, contemporary Greek cultures. The Theatre of Dionysus, still visible on the slopes of the Athenian Acropolis, is emblematic of this cultural fascination.

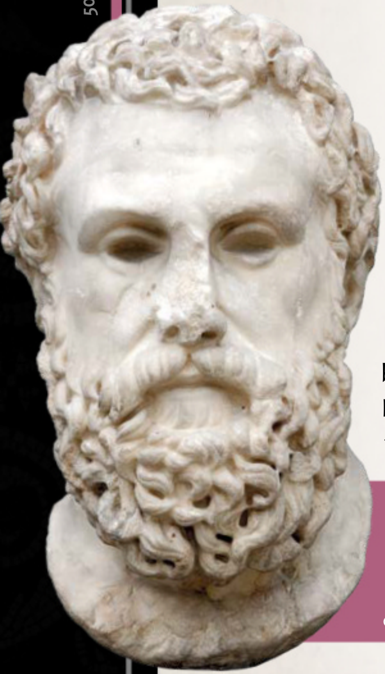
Early Athenian drama

Athenian dramatic performances, thought to have been first introduced during the reign of the tyrant Peisistratus, may not have always taken place on the slopes of the Acropolis. There was a space within the Athenian agora called the *orchestra*, the 'dancing floor', although where exactly this space was is unknown. Xenophon, in his work *The Cavalry Commander*, says that choruses would dance for the Twelve Gods (3.2). As there was an Altar of the Twelve Gods in the Athenian agora, built during the reign of Peisistratus' sons (see Thucydides 6.54), then the *orchestra* was likely beside it.

The word meaning the stage of the Theatre of Dionysus might also suggest a similar origin of the theatre in Athens. *Skene* means both 'stage' and 'tent'. It is possible that a tent was raised in the agora during the early performances within which the dancers and actors could change their costume, with the name being retained after the performances moved to the slopes of the Acropolis.

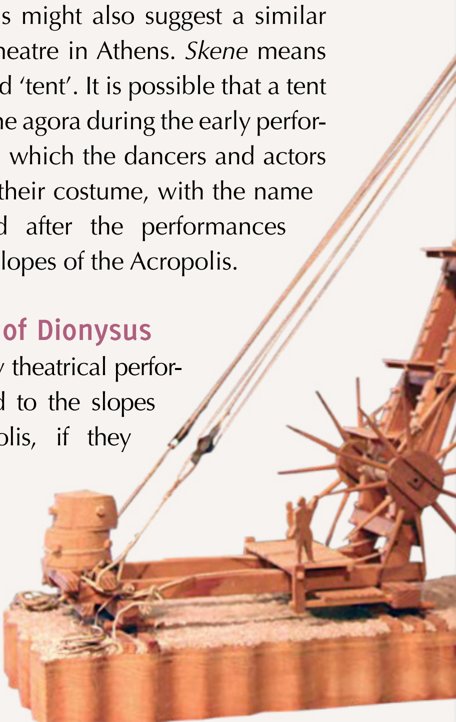
The Theatre of Dionysus

When and why theatrical performances moved to the slopes of the Acropolis, if they



A Roman copy of a bust – based on a Greek orginal from the fourth centrury BC – representing Aeschylus, the 'Father of Tragedy'. Of the many plays he wrote, only seven have survived fully intact.

© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons



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A piece of second–first century BC gold jewellery, representing a mask of either Silenus or a slave.

© Dallas Art Museum

were not always there, is unknown. One plausible reason is the reconstruction of Athens after Xerxes' invasion of Greece. However, it is equally plausible that the performances simply grew too popular for the agora to be a suitable venue, and so performances moved to the area that would become the Theatre of Dionysus, the slopes of the Acropolis providing a natural *theatron* ('viewing place') for the audience.

The current ruins of the Theatre of Dionysus date from the fourth century BC, and the theatre had been rebuilt several times before then, meaning there is little archaeology can tell us about the early theatre. Similarly, representations of theatrical scenes on vases do not show the theatre either, with artists instead choosing to represent the scenes that theatregoers would have had to imagine, such as temples or palaces.

That said, the surviving plays do provide hints about the development of the theatre. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (ca. 458) does not refer to a tent but instead supposes that the *skene* was a building, likely made of wood, with doors that the actors could pass through. Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* refers to wooden benches (395). Many characters in later plays are imagined as moving up onto the roof of buildings within the scene, such as Antigone in Euripides' *The Phoenician Women* (88–108) or Dicaeopolis' wife in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (262).

Tricks of the trade

The *skene* also incorporated mechanical elements that playwrights could use, such as the *ekkyklema*, a platform that could be rolled onto the stage. However, the most impressive mechanical element was the *mechane*, or crane. The earliest possible use of the crane in the surviving plays is in Euripides' *Medea* in 431 BC, but it may have been used before this point.

The crane was primarily used for carrying gods, whether carrying them up to the roof of the *skene* or suspending them in the air, which is where the phrase *deus ex machina* comes from. The appearance of Apollo and Helen at the end of Euripides' *Orestes* (1625–1690) is one such example of the crane in action. Indeed, gods in tragedy appear to have been associated with cranes by the fourth century as in, for example, Plato's *Cratylus* (425d) or Aristotle's *Poetics* (1454a37–b6). Before the introduction of drama, in Archaic Greek literature the gods had been depicted as flying, such as in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (317) or fragment one of Sappho's poetry.

There are no surviving representations of the crane. However, it was likely a very large and powerful machine. It was certainly capable of carrying multiple actors at once, and it may have even been capable of carrying large props with actors upon them. For example, Medea may have appeared in a chariot with two dummies or child actors in Euripides' *Medea* (1317–1414), and Trygaeus rides a dung-beetle prop in Aristophanes' *Peace* (80–178). According to Julius Pollux, a writer from the second century AD, the crane may have been large enough for characters to alight on the stage, suggesting it was large enough to reach up and over the *skene*!

Athenian drama must certainly have been a spectacle. No wonder it attracted people from throughout the Greek world. AH

Owain Williams is the editor of* Ancient History *magazine.

There are many characters from Greek myth who are known to fly. Medea, depicted here in her flying golden chariot drawn by serpents, was one such character. Euripides' ***Medea***, performed ca. 431 BC, is the earliest surviving play that may have used a crane.

© The Cleveland Museum of Art

Later Roman theatres had much more elaborate stages than early Greek ones. The theatre of Aspendos, shown here, built during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, is a well-preserved example. Julius Pollux may have had this type of theatre in mind when he wrote about cranes.

© Nejdet Duzen / Shutterstock

There are no surviving depictions of the mechane, the crane used in Greek theatre productions. This is a possible reconstruction of a crane used in construction in ancient Greece, which the mechane may have resembled.

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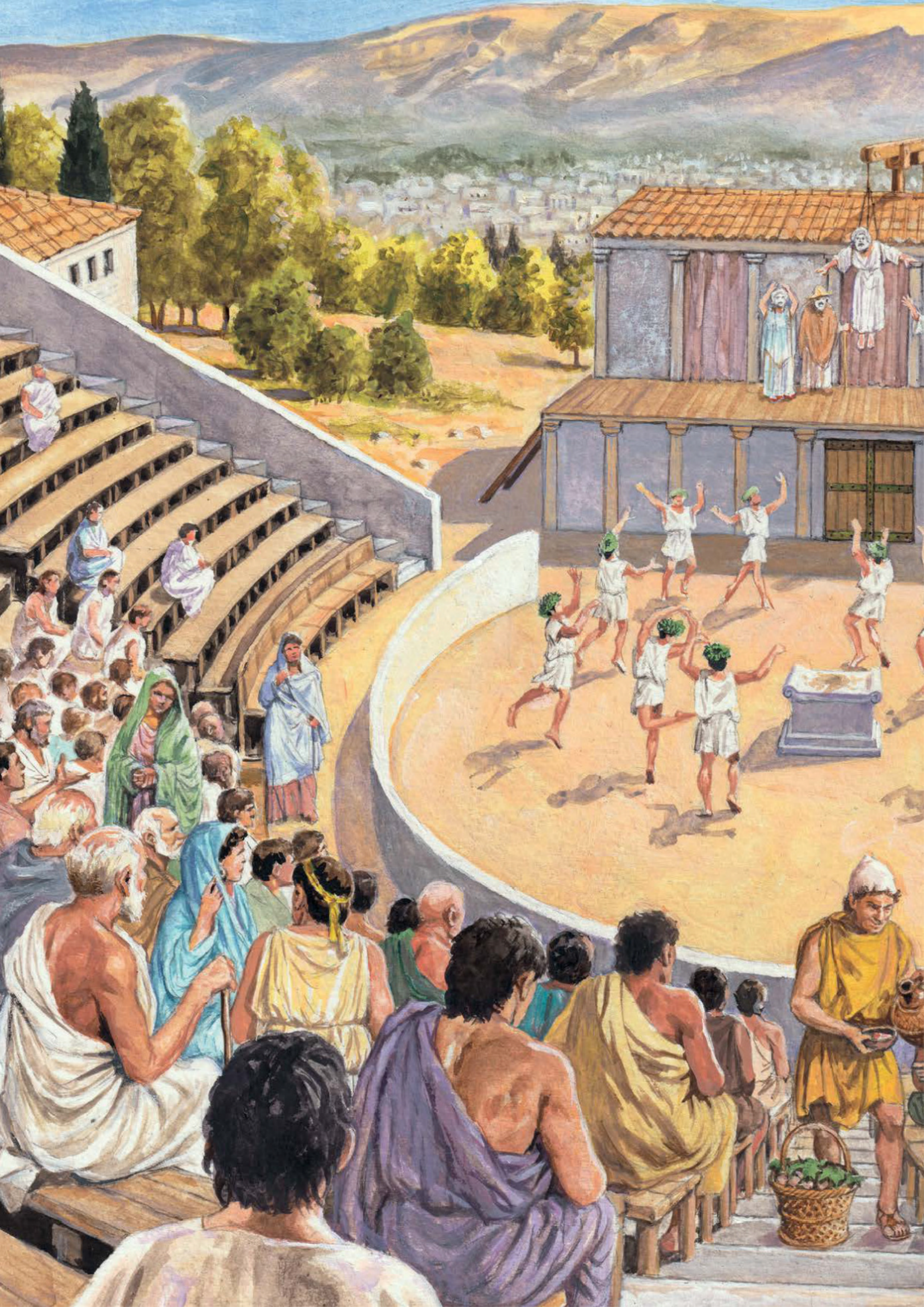
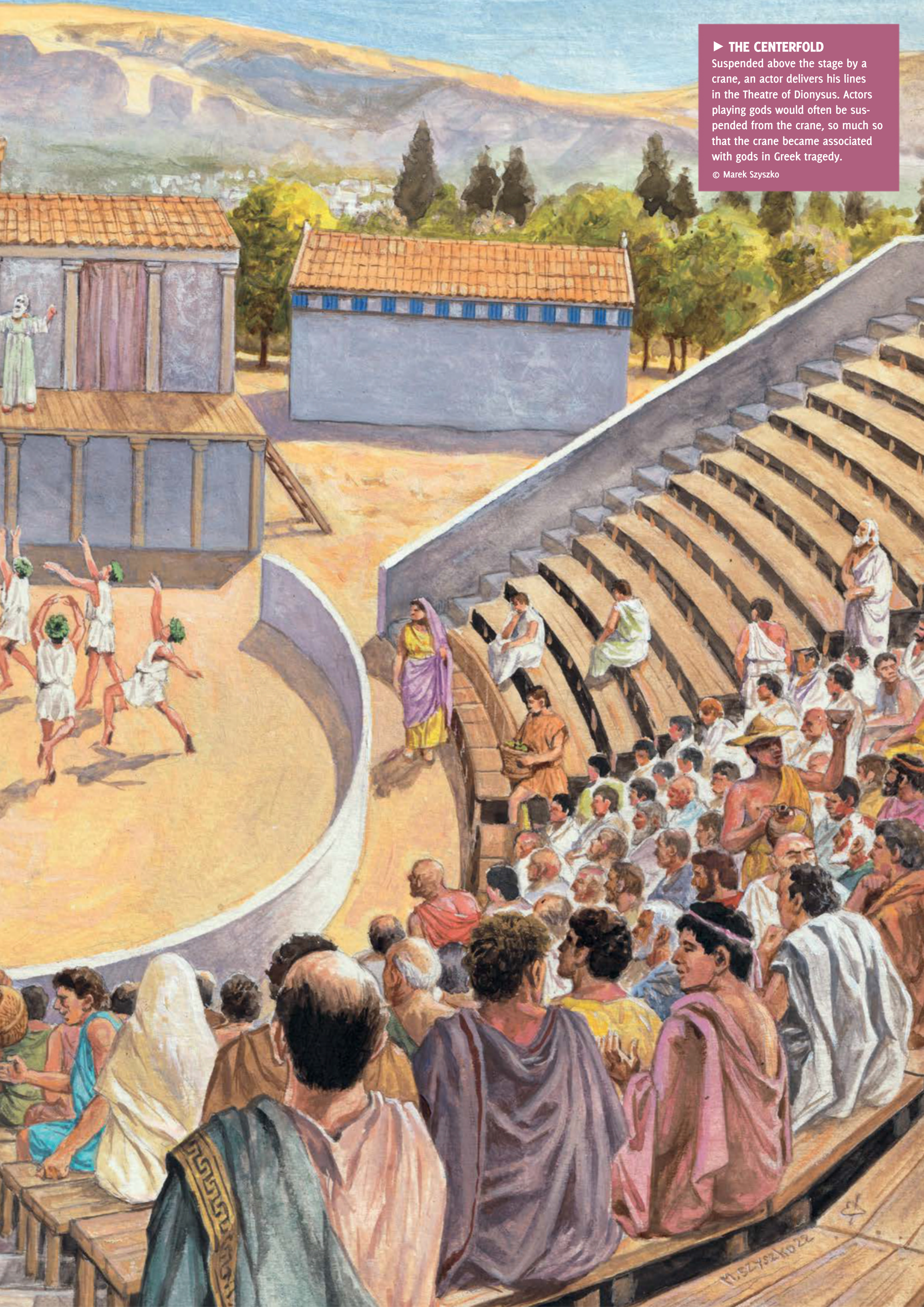
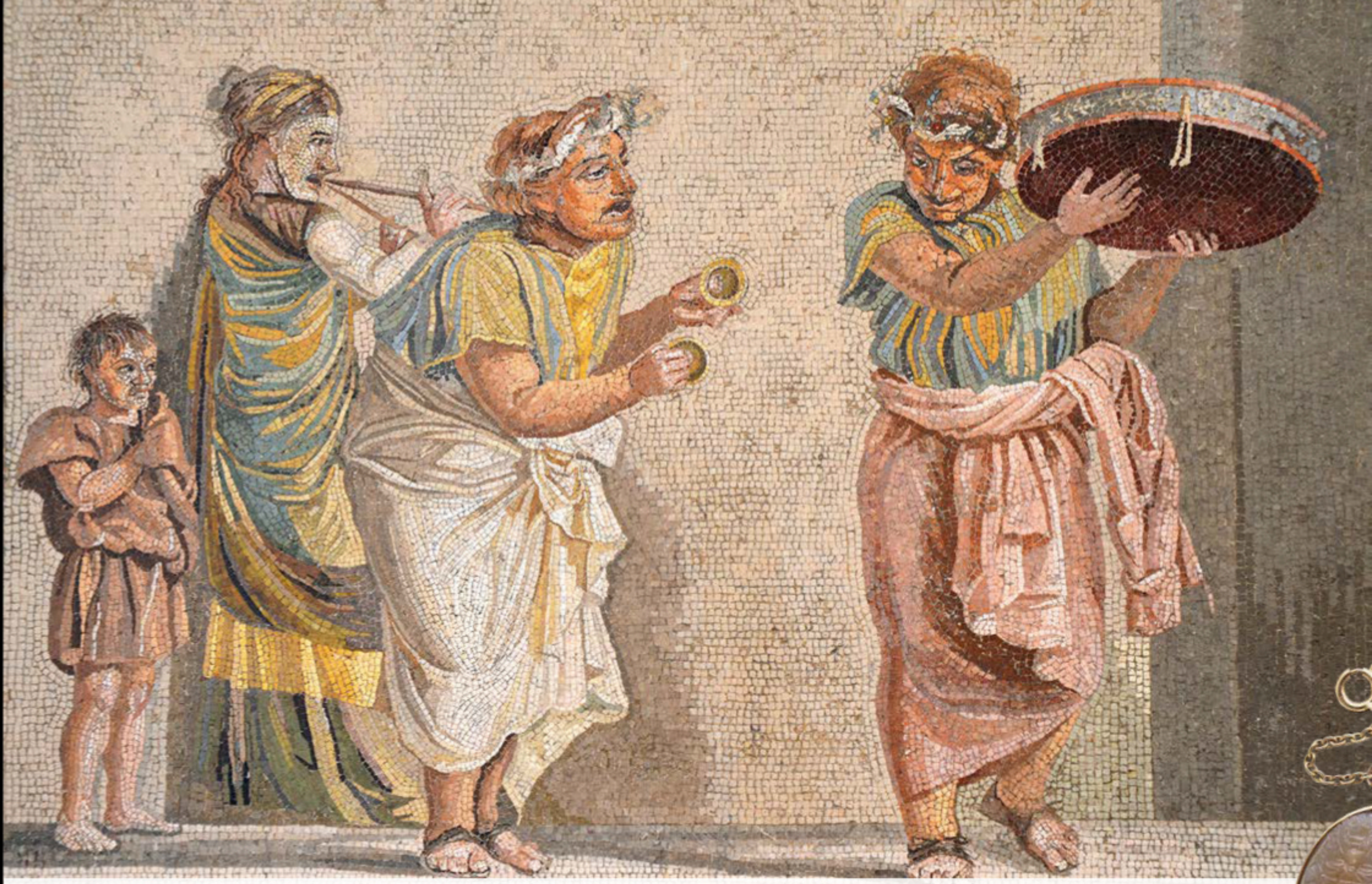




► THE CENTERFOLD
Suspended above the stage by a crane, an actor delivers his lines in the Theatre of Dionysus. Actors playing gods would often be suspended from the crane, so much so that the crane became associated with gods in Greek tragedy.

© Marek Szyszko



A mosaic from the Villa of Cicero, near Pompeii, depicting street musicians with theatre masks, and attributed to the artist Dioskourides of Samos.

THEME

THE ACOUSTICS OF THE GREEK THEATRE MASKS

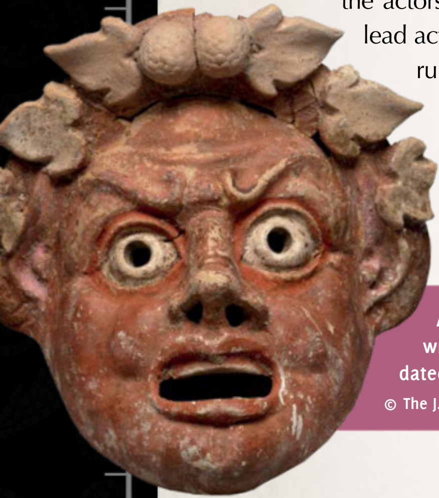
By *Jessica Clarke*

LOUD AND CLEAR?

Greek theatre was masked theatre. All the actors wore large, visually striking masks, which concealed the performer beneath and projected a new character to the watching audience. Brightly coloured, highly stylized, and somewhat oversized, the theatrical masks were an essential component of ancient performance culture and are perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of ancient theatre.

Masks play almost no part in modern theatrical entertainment, and even productions of classical plays are seldom masked performances. Indeed, the theatre director Peter Reynolds recalls that in rehearsals for a masked performance of *Oedipus* in 1996, many of the actors had a strong aversion to masks, including the lead actor Alan Howard. In an interview after the play's run the actress Judi Dench was reported as saying that she wished she had been part of the production "until she remembered the masks and felt profoundly relieved that she wasn't". Over the years, the modern aversion to masked performance has created a significant barrier between the historian and their understanding of the ancient theatre performances.

This barrier is by no means helped by the fact that not a single mask survives from the ancient world in the archaeological record. Whilst we have a handful of ancient plays, and the ruins of ancient theatre buildings themselves, none of the costumes and masks of these performances survive to give us a direct link to what these ancient performances might have looked like. What we do have, however, are the images of masks that we find in Greek artwork, the most striking examples being the terracotta replicas of masks. These replicas help to fill the gap between the lost ancient masks and the historian studying ancient theatre.



A terracotta polychrome mask of a satyr wearing a wreath, likely a copy of a theatre mask, from Sicily, dated to ca. 200-100 BC.

© The J. Paul Getty Museum

© Carole Raddato / Flickr

One of the best-preserved examples is a terracotta mask that was most likely manufactured in Sicily around the third century BC. It is the mask of a satyr wearing a wreath of ivy leaves with two round pieces of fruit at the centre. It is shaped like a 'helmet', thus implying that such masks went over the top of the actor's head, holding the mask in place.

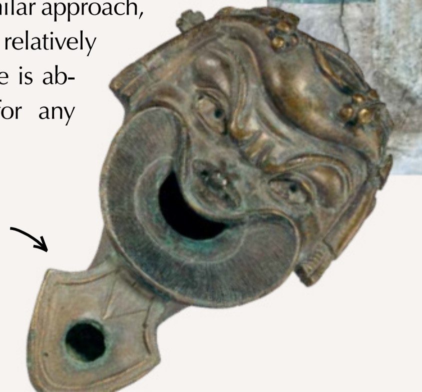
In modern theatre, the spectator's vision is limited by the darkened auditorium and the proscenium arch that frames the stage. Ancient theatre, however, beginning on the south-east slope of the Acropolis in Athens, had to compete with daylight, the view of the surrounding landscape, and the assembled spectators themselves. Whilst every part of the modern setting is designed to keep the audience's attention focused entirely on the theatrical action, the setting of ancient theatre acts as more of a hinderance than a help. The mask therefore played a critical role in the visual appeal of the ancient theatre. The enlarged colourful faces would no doubt have made a powerful impression on the watching audience, as an aid to captivating, and subsequently holding, the attention of the crowd.

A Roman cameo from the first century AD depicting four theatre masks. The masks are divided with the name Euripides, one of the 'Big Three' of Classical Athenian tragedy.

© The J. Paul Getty Museum

But beyond the visuals, how did the mask effect the sound quality of a performance? If the appearance of the mask aided the actor in the delivery of the play, did the design of the mask likewise support the actor's voice? Did masks improve the volume, quality, and resonance of the human voice or did they muffle the words of the famous Greek poets and playwrights?

One eminent historian of ancient performance wrote, some sixteen years ago, that based on the appearance of the mask and its uses in open-air settings, the mask would most likely "inhibit clarity in an outdoor venue". To the historian now, this seems like an odd suggestion, as it poses the question of why masked performance would have developed in the first place if the mask inhibited the performance in any way. Another scholar, writing around the same time, took a similar approach, stating that "masks had a relatively small aperture, and there is absolutely no evidence for any kind of megaphone or any other device to enhance voice projection or quality".



A Roman bronze lamp in the shape of a Comic mask, dated to AD 75-125. The mask is a representation of a stock character from Greek New Comedy, the 'Leading Slave', who was both cunning as well as resourceful.

© The J. Paul Getty Museum,

At the time, the claim that there was "absolutely no evidence" was indeed true. However, more recent studies have revealed that there is in fact ample evidence for the mask acting as a method for the amplification of the actor's voice.

A marble model of the Roman-era theatre of Baalbek, in Lebanon.

© Livius.org

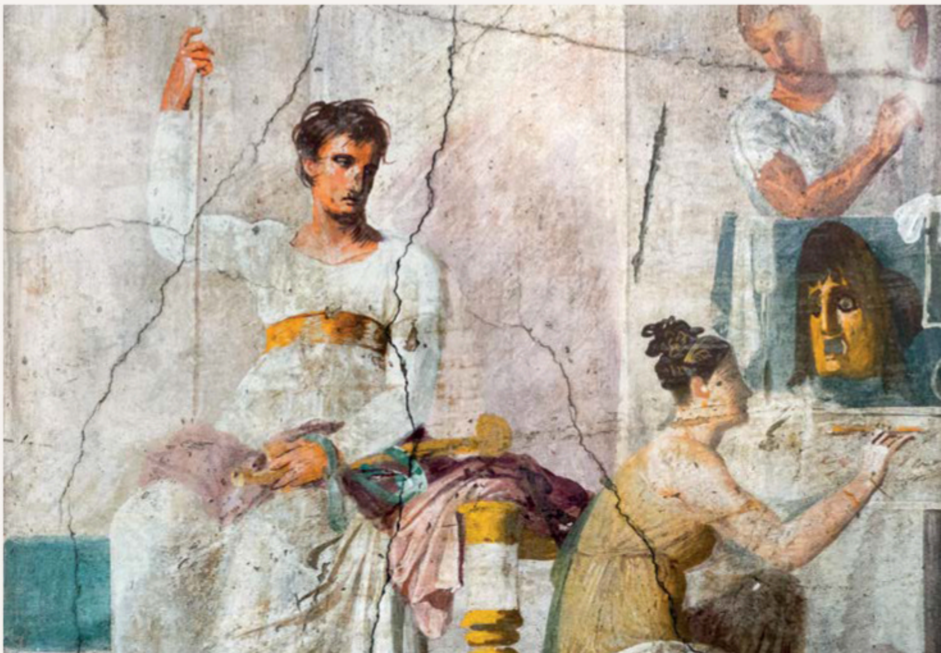
Recreating masked theatre

The first study that contested the previously pervasive opinion of mask acoustics was conducted by Dr Amy R. Cohen and her research team at Randolph College at the University of Virginia. In the summer of 2007, Dr Cohen put together a short research project that aimed, in her words, to construct "full usable masks for the cast of *The Clouds* to be performed using original practices". The intention was therefore to get a better sense of how ancient Greek theatre masks functioned on stage, how the actors' delivery of their lines altered when they were masked, and, crucially, how the masks affected the sound of the actor's voice around the auditorium.

By engaging in this process of reconstruction, the masks had to meet with several crite-

A fresco from the *gymnasium* of Herculaneum, dated to ca. AD 30-40. The painting depicts an actor seated on a chair watching the woman to his right write something on the base of a pillar topped with a tragic mask as another standing figure watches on.

© ArchaiOptix / Wikimedia Commons



A Roman oil lamp from Piumbino, Italy, dated between ca. AD 1 - 200, with a representation of a seated sculptor working on a large theatrical mask.

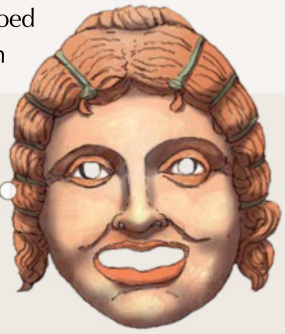
© The Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

ria. First, they had to be made of a material that would not survive in the archaeological record. As no masks survive today, they cannot have been made of anything particularly hardy or durable. Second, they had to be light enough to be worn without too much discomfort for the actor. And third, they had to be moulded into a shape that allowed for the facial features of the mask to be painted and for hair to be added to the top. As the goal of the project was also to stage a production of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the masks also had to be as close an approximation as possible to the masks that would have been worn in 423 BC when the play was first performed in Athens.

The recreation of ancient masks that are not anachronistic is particularly difficult when selecting materials. The only evidence we have for what theatrical masks were made of comes from two fragmentary references found in the literature of late antiquity. In the writings of the eminent scholar and celebrated cleric of late antiquity, Isidore of Seville, we find a reference to actors wearing "imitation faces made of stuccoed linen adorned with

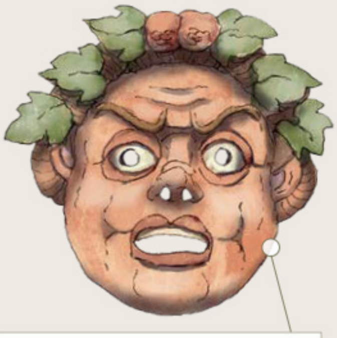
The world of ancient masks

The only descriptions that we have of ancient mask types come from Julius Pollux, a Greek scholar in the third century AD, who was born in Naucratis in Egypt but who lived and worked in Athens. He wrote a text called the *Onomasticon*, in which he describes the repertoire of comic masks (forty-four in total). Here is a selection of the most common masks and the characters they represent.



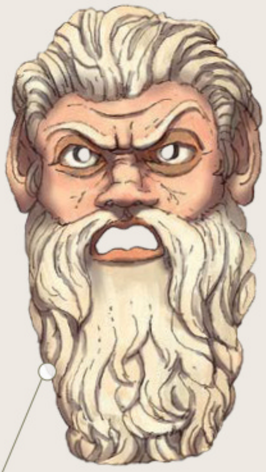
THE HETAERA

With a reddish complexion and curling hair, the hetaera, a symbol of opulence, would have been easily recognizable on stage, such as Bacchis in Menander's *Dis Exapaton*.



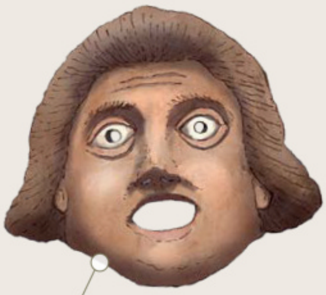
THE SATYR

Identified by the vines in his hair, the satyr would have been a common character in Satyr plays, often forming the chorus. Euripides' *Cyclopes* is the only surviving play of that genre.



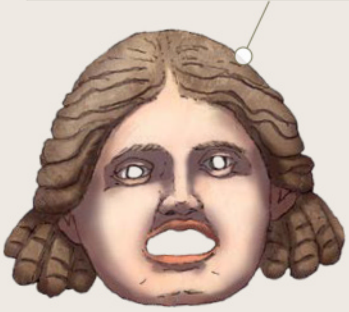
THE LEADING OLD MAN

With a wreath of white hair and a long white beard, the Leading Old Man, such as Knemon in Menander's *Dyskolos*, is often an obstacle for the hero to overcome.



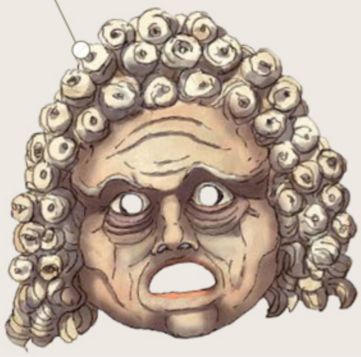
THE YOUNG HERO

Ruddy, athletic, and tanned, with raised eyebrows, the admirable young man was the hero of comedies, such as Menander's *Samia*.



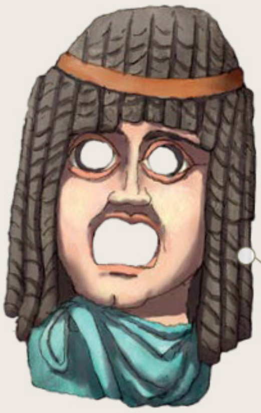
THE MAIDEN

With a pale complexion, a prominent parting, and straight black brows, the Maiden often served as the object of the comic hero's affections, as the daughter of Knemon does in Menander's *Dyskolos*.



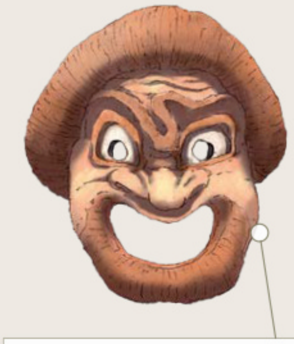
THE WOLFISH OLD WOMAN

Characterized by her wrinkled face and squinting eyes, the white-haired Wolfish Old Woman would accompany the Maiden, as does the Nurse in Menander's *Samia*.



THE TRAGIC YOUNG MAN

Likely the most common mask early theatre goers would have encountered, the Tragic Young Man, with his high hair tied by a ribbon, was a frequent character in tragedies, like Orestes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.



THE LEADING SLAVE

With bright red hair and a furrowed brow, the Leading Slave is, unsurprisingly, the leader of the slave characters, such as Daos in Menander's *Aspis*.

A gold ring, dated to ca. 325–300 BC, with an engraving of an actor holding a theatre mask. Greek theatre culture provided a wealth of iconographic imagery.

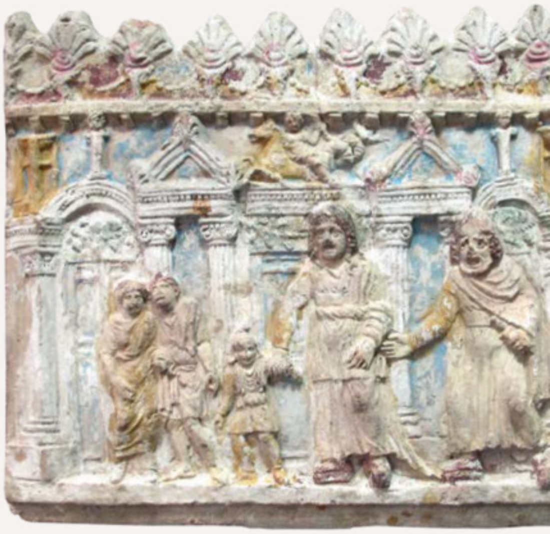
© The J. Paul Getty Museum

various colours". Likewise, in a commentary written around the same time on the stagecraft of Aristophanes' play *Frogs*, the anonymous author writes that masks were made from stuck-together pieces of rag.

After trialling multiple materials and methods of construction, Dr Cohen's research team arrived at a birds-eye weave cotton stiffened with wheat paste, which was supported on the actor's head by wooden dowels, some of which were connected to a skull-cap structure. The process of making these masks began with the construction of a clay mould of the actor's head, which was then draped with pieces of glue-soaked cotton. The cotton was then moulded to create deep contours so that the facial features were clearly visible as the cotton hardened into a permanent shape. To hold the finished mask in place, two ribbon ties were attached to the mask: one pulling down from the inside of the forehead to the base of the actor's neck, and one from the temples to the back of the head. The mask could then be held firmly in place as the actor moved energetically around the stage.

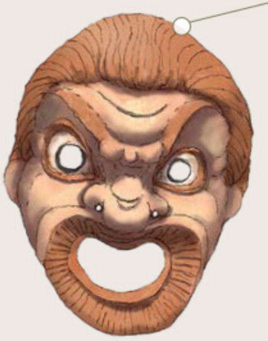
The resulting masks were thus considerably bigger than the actor's head in order to allow for movement and had enlarged facial features. Whether these over-sized facial features are accurate to the ancient stage still remains in question. Some of the representations of masked actors in ancient artwork do seem to be distorted, with the head appearing much larger than life. In others, however, the mask seems to be relatively snug. For example, a famous mosaic from Pompeii, which dates to the second century BC, but which copies an earlier Hellenistic painting, shows actors performing a well-known Greek play (Menander's *Theophoroumene* or 'The Demonic Girl'). In this beautifully rendered mosaic, the masks seem to be the expected 'helmet' masks, but they do not seem to be substantially bigger than the actor's head.

Dr Cohen's recreated masks yielded some interesting results. First, that the voice of the masked actor was clearer when it was in a lower pitch. This fits well with the masks of fifth-century BC Athens, where all the actors would have been male. Second, the size of the actor's head and how much space there was between the head and the mask also contributed to the sound. A consistent space between the head of the actor and the mask contributed to the resonance of the actor's voice.



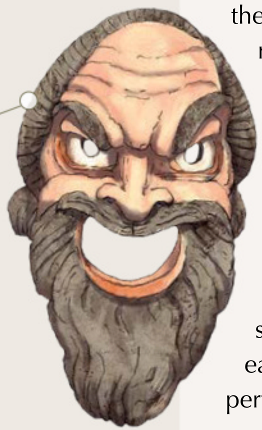
This Roman terracotta slab served as the base of an *aedicule* from the tomb of P. Numitorius Hilarus near Rome at the end of the first century BC. The relief depicts a tragic theatrical scene.

© Sailko / Wikimedia Commons



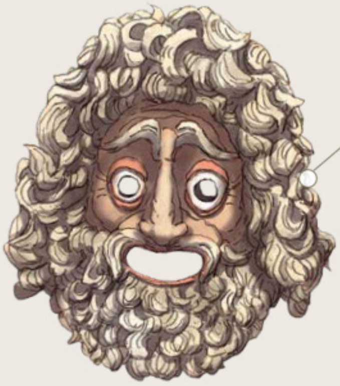
THE COOK

As with most slave characters, the Cook was red haired, and was also often depicted as balding. Like Sikon in Menander's *Dyskolos*, they could be harsh characters.



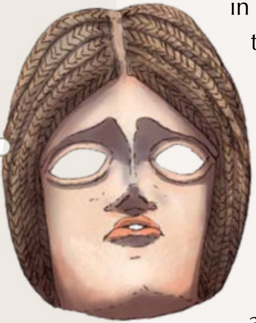
THE BROTHELKEEPER

With a smile on his lips, furrowed brows, and a bald or balding head, the Brothelkeeper often serves as an opponent to the hero's plans, such as Cappadox in Plautus' *Curculio*.



THE TRAGIC OLD MAN

With a mane of white hair and a long white beard, the Tragic Old Man would have been a strong presence on the stage, such as Agamemnon in Euripides' *Agamemnon*.



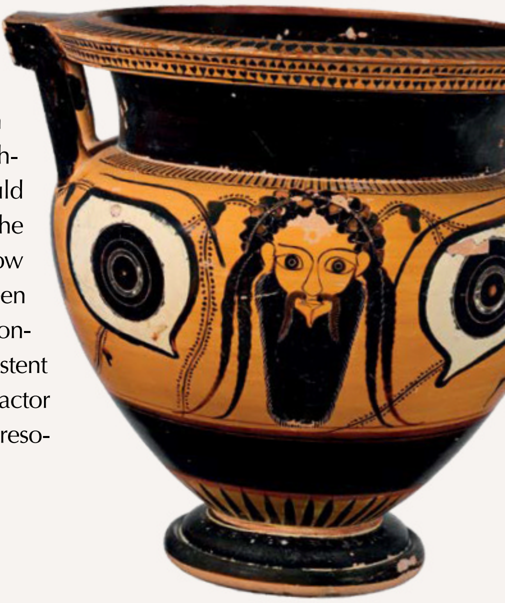
A PANTOMIME MASK

Notably lacking an open mouth, this mask was used in pantomime performances, where an actor would dance while the chorus would narrate the tragic play to music.

© Rocío Espin

A black-figure Attic terracotta *krater* (a mixing bowl for water and wine), dated to ca. 520-510 BC. Dionysus, with vines growing from his hair, stares out from the vase. Cult statues of Dionysus may have been decorated with masks in the Archaic period.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A terracotta calyx-krater attributed to the Konnakis Group, dated to ca. 325-300 BC, depicting a comic actor taking part in a Phylax play, a parody of tragedy or Greek gods and heroes. Actors depicted on such vases wore short tunics with padding beneath, large *phalloi*, and tights.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Most importantly, however, the experiment revealed that the mask was a huge help in combatting the problems of staging Greek theatre. In the curved sweep of the orchestra, an actor in a Greek theatre must at some moments have their back turned to at least a portion of the audience – unless they stayed very close to the front of the stage at all times. Indeed, most scholars have argued that the actor could only face forwards, which greatly limited the range of an actor's movement, or that if they did move around, they would exclude members of the audience sat in cheaper seats.

However, this study found that when wearing a mask, an actor could be heard nearly as clearly when they had their backs turned as when they were facing the audience. To quote Dr Cohen: "Without a mask, an actor could not be heard from behind; with the mask, she could, and as clearly as when she was facing forward." Without having to remain facing forwards at all times when speaking, an actor had a full range of movement and could speak to the audience in all areas of the seating and to the other actors on the stage with ease.

The acoustics of the theatre

If we jump forward a few years, we find that the study of mask acoustics takes a technical turn. Whilst experimental archaeological studies can provide fascinating insight into mask construction and the stagecraft of masked performance, these studies do lack scientific data.

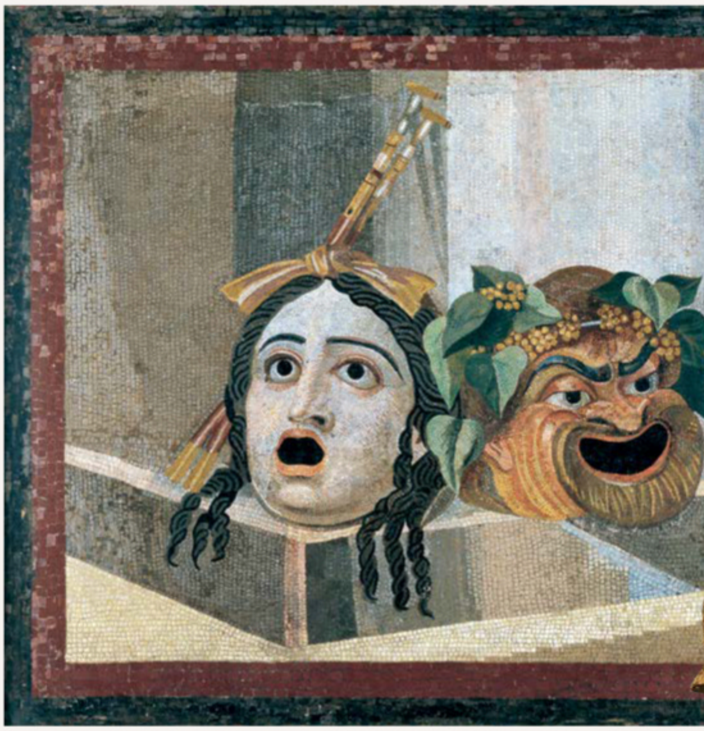
This was rectified by a study in 2014 in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Patras in Greece. In the study, led by Dr Fotios Kontomichos, replica masks were constructed (using similar methods to Dr Cohen's study) and through a series of controlled experiments the acoustics of those masks were tested within an ancient Greek theatre. The study therefore not only provided the scientific data, which was lacking from previous studies, but also took the mask into a real-life ancient performance space.

In the experiment, masks were constructed out of hardened liquid stone plaster and were placed onto a head and torso simulator, called a 'KEMAR mannequin'. This mannequin allows for sweeper signals to be transmitted through the built-in 'mouth simulator', and the magnitude of these signals could then be recorded on a microphone placed at varying distances from the mannequin and at different angles around the auditorium, thus determining whether the mask interfered with the signals which were transmitted through the mannequin's mouth.

The theatre selected for this experiment was the theatre at Epidaurus. As a location for testing the auditory features of the mask, this theatre is particularly well chosen. It is one of the best-preserved Greek theatres in existence today; practically all the seating tiers remain intact and only the stage structure is now missing. It is also located away from the modern city, which limits the amount of background noise.

The study found that when an actor's voice was in the range of 60–1000 Hz, the mask enhanced the actor's voice, resulting in a deeper and amplified sound for almost all listener angles and distances. This range corresponds to the fundamental area of male speech, which thus successfully corroborated the anecdotal findings of Dr Cohen's earlier study: that the ancient theatre mask specifically amplified male voices. Masks were also found to enhance the directivity of the actor's voice, which meant that the sound would be amplified for members of the audience who were sat at the sides of the auditorium, and not just for those sat directly in front of the stage.

The implication of these findings is that not only were the masks specifically de-



Dating from the second century AD, this Roman mosaic depicts the theatrical masks of Tragedy and Comedy. Comedic masks often had more exaggerated features than tragic masks.

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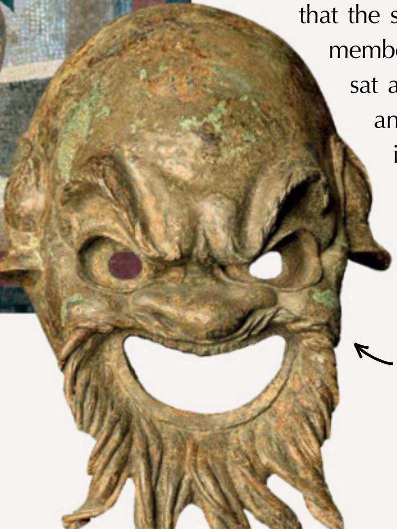

A bronze mask representing Papposilenos – the tutor and one of the followers of Dionysus – dated to the first half of the first century BC.

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One of the most remarkable ancient sites in Greece, and one of the best preserved theatres from antiquity, the Theatre of Epidaurus. The remains, dating to the fourth century BC, capture the sheer scope of theatrical performances in Ancient Greece. It was here that the acoustics of Greek theatre masks was measured.

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A terracotta figuring, dated to ca. 400–375 BC, depicting an actor playing a slave. He is seated on an altar, emptying the purses he has stolen.

© Kirk Fisher / Shutterstock

signed to help with the projection of an actor's voice, but that the theatres themselves were likewise carefully designed to optimise the clarity of the performance. The geometric shape of Greek theatre reflects and scatters any sound produced in the orchestra, meaning that the voice of the actor would rise in circular waves to the audience seated around the auditorium. This sound was also intensified by the limestone surfaces at the back of the theatre and behind the seats, which continue the reflection process – bouncing the sound around the auditorium.

That these were conscious and clever architectural decisions is made clear in the architectural treatise written by the Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius. In his famous work *De Architectura*, Vitruvius tells us that ancient architects studied music and mathematics so that they could build theatres that provided a satisfying auditory experience. Vitruvius writes that "ancient architects followed nature's footsteps, traced the voice as it rose, and carried out the ascent of the theatre seats. By the rules of mathematics and the method of music, they sought to make the voices from the stage rise more clearly and sweetly to the spectators' ears" (5.3.8).

Conclusion

The sound produced by the mask at the theatre was ideal for the watching audience. With performances occurring in large, open, and most likely rowdy outdoor theatres, both the mask and the shape of the theatre was designed to help the actors project their voices. According to Aristotle, the voice of a successful actor had three qualities: "volume, harmony, and rhythm". He wrote that the actors on stage who "use these three qualities properly nearly always carry off the prizes in dramatic contests" (*Rhetoric*, 1403b). Based on the recent scientific studies on the acoustic properties of the mask, we now know that the achievement of these loud, harmonious, and rhythmic voices was aided by the form of the ancient theatre mask and by the curved, racked seating of the Greek theatres themselves. The masks of ancient theatre were not only visually striking but also made sure that the whole audience could hear the action unfolding on the stage. **AH**

Jessica Clarke is a PhD researcher at University College London.

Rather than hinder the acoustics, the use of masks actually helped transmit the actors' voices about the theatre. This diagram demonstrates how sound was transmitted throughout the Ancient Greek theatre from both the *skene* and the *orchestra*.

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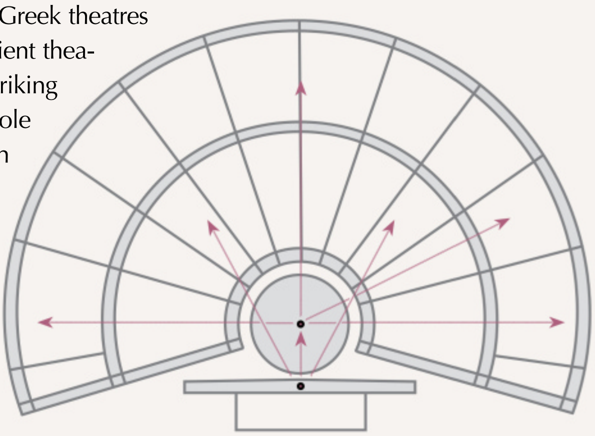
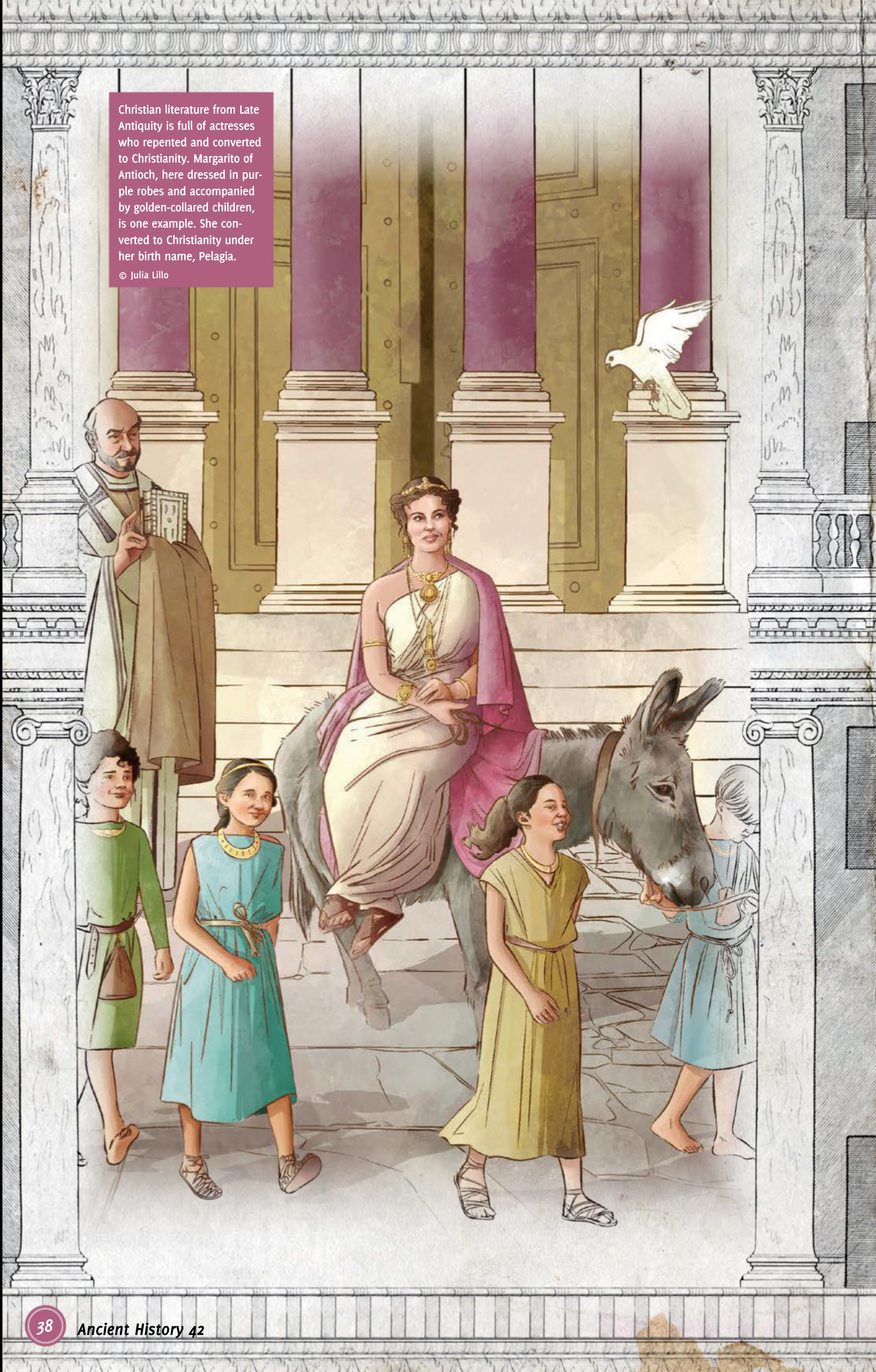




Christian literature from Late Antiquity is full of actresses who repented and converted to Christianity. Margarito of Antioch, here dressed in purple robes and accompanied by golden-collared children, is one example. She converted to Christianity under her birth name, Pelagia.

© Julia Lillo

THEME

COURTESANS, ACTRESSES, AND EMPRESSES

THEATRE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

By David Potter

By the mid-sixth century AD, actresses had come to be equated with prostitutes. Although their profession had never been thought moral, by this period, a time when Christianity had become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, actresses had come to wealth and status, even rising to one of the highest offices in the Roman world – the empress. Writers reacted to the rise of actresses' status with contempt.

A law describing the festivities to accompany the entry of a new consul into office at Constantinople, promulgated in AD 537, perfectly illustrates the contradiction inherent to theatrical performance in the Christian Roman empire: the clash between the popularity of the events and the perception that they encouraged immoral behaviour. In this case, the law lists a series of processions involving public performances. The fifth of these would be in the theatre of the *pornai* where there would be performances of tragedy, comedy, and dancing, all spectacles that are pleasing to the eye and to the ear.

In classical Greek the meaning of *pornai* is 'prostitutes', but by the sixth century AD the meaning of the word had been extended to include actresses. The usage was plainly so common that it could be used here by the official responsible for drafting new legislation, Tribonian, who worked for and was favoured by Theodora, empress and former actress. Another account, favourable to Theodora, refers to her as the empress from the *porneion*, which in Classical Greek would mean 'brothel' but here simply means 'who was an actress'.

The assimilation of actresses to prostitutes, asserted in Roman law from the time of Augustus (31 BC–AD 14) onwards, represents attitudes towards independent women working to support themselves, even if they attained considerable prominence. These attitudes hardened with the emergence of Christianity as the state's official religion during the fourth and fifth centuries AD. But this assimilation is significant in another way, for the law of 537 suggests very strongly that women had become dominant in the acting professions.

Promoting paganism and promiscuity?

Christian complaints about the theatre often offer us the best insight into what people might expect to see. One criticism, for instance, was that the stage preserved stories about the pagan gods. Mosaics of the fourth and fifth centuries suggest that this was indeed the case. Another leader of the church railed against "teaching that destroys the mind" and "the great fountain that daily vomits forth spectacles". The people of the stage were "friends of idols" and lovers of "dead images" who mimed the stories of the gods, which they believed to be true, as a way of honouring those divinities. Such people were alienated from Jesus and they did Satan's work promoting paganism.

For some time, full-scale performances of ancient tragedies (still studied as part of the school curriculum) had given way to performances of selected scenes, typically those of the greatest emotional content, and mythological themes had been taken up in popular forms of theatre such as pantomime and mime. Pantomime, also known as 'rhythmic tragic dance', involved a performance by a solo dancer accompanied by a singer and orchestra. Favourite acts included emotionally charged themes such as the madness of Hercules or Leda and the Swan. Pantomime dancers were always male, as were actors in traditional theatre. That was not the case in what was by far the most popular form of theatre: mime.

The subjects of mimes ranged from stories of adultery to farces involving foreign peoples or pagan gods and some that made fun of Christian institutions (holy virgins seem to have been especially amusing at one point). One play for which we have part of an actual script tells the story of Charition, a woman had ended up on the coast of India from whence she was rescued by her brother. The brother has a clown with him. The clown farts loudly and often as they bumble about to escape from the temple of the Moon Goddess. There's also a chorus of hunting Indian women who come on stage with bows and speak gibberish that's supposed to represent their language, and an Indian king who shows up and dances when the clown has gotten him drunk. The surviving script indicates that there was a lot of music as the chorus danced and sang. Charition, like a good upper-class girl, seems to be very virtuous and absolutely refuses to steal from the temple on her way to escape.

There was a wide range of plays on the theme of adultery. One involved a clever young man, the woman he was trying to get into bed with, and her dim-witted husband. A typical scene in these plays was one in which the young man hid in a chest from which he had to escape so he didn't suffocate while the husband was still in the room. A variation on the theme, for which we also have a portion of a script, is one in which the wife tries to seduce a handsome young slave. In this case the woman comes across as a dreadful character. The play opens with a slave named Aesop refusing his mistress's advances because of his devotion to another slave (in this case Apollonia). The mistress orders them both killed, only to be told in the next scene that some god has set them free. Apollonia is recaptured, and Aesop shows up a scene later faking his own death. At this point a new character appears – a slave who will sleep with the mistress, if only she would murder her spouse. The play ends with Apollonia and Aesop rising from the dead, and the rescue of the master from his scheming wife.

> "Other physical entertainments involved aquatic performances, which occasioned howls of protest from John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch in the late fourth century. He was appalled at the notion that members of his congregation preferred watching scantily clad women swim to listening to him.

Some variety was plainly important – audiences didn't want to see the same thing every day – but so was basic familiarity with the plots. In big theatres with the large audiences typical of the ancient world, subtle gesture was not part of an actor's routine, and it was useful if an audience when seeing an actor come on stage would have some notion of what to expect.

Slapstick and swimming sinners

The humour could get quite physical, and a rough contemporary of Theodora says that mimes would hit each other with sticks. Bishop Severus of Antioch, an older contemporary of Theodora's, gives us some idea of what dance routines looked like when he composed a sermon on the evils of the art form complaining about those "who look on the vile gyrations of the dancing madness with their many turns". In an effort to discredit Theodora, Procopius, the author of the scandalous *Secret History*, a vicious attack on the empress and her husband, says that she was a good mimic and would get hit a lot, the implication being that she wasn't talented enough to get a big part on her own. Rather she would appear on stage in scanty clothing and have a goose eat grain off her body.

Other physical entertainments involved aquatic performances, which occasioned howls of protest from John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch in the late fourth century. He was appalled at the notion that members of his congregation preferred watching scantily clad women swim to listening to him. The specific performance type that he refers to was called *maiouma*, which originated somewhere in the eastern border lands of the Empire (*mai* is the Aramaic word for water). We don't know much more about it than this – though it is notable that it spread west at least as far as central Turkey, where the city of Aphrodisias sponsored performances and an imperial governor served as the *Maioumarch* (man in charge of the *maiouma*). A pair of legal texts also from the late fourth century reflect the controversy over these performances. One bans *maiouma* as being "foul and indecent", while a second one corrects the first, stating that *maiouma* can be performed so long as it is "modest and chaste". The definition of "modest and chaste" was in the eye of the beholder – but of more significance is the statement that the emperors permit the theatrical arts to be practised lest sadness be produced through banning them. The most likely content for a performance of *maiouma* would be an aquatic myth.

Stage performers of all sorts worked under the aegis of the circus factions. The head administrator was the faction dancing master, who seems to have ranked just below the overall head of the faction, who would typically have been a former charioteer. Most of the theatrical talent within the faction would have been homegrown; Procopius tells us that Theodora began as an assistant to Comito, her older sister, and that she was part of a chorus before she started getting independent roles. Then as now, not everyone who started on a performing career was going to get leading roles, but to judge from the case of Theodora it's likely that someone who was going to 'make it' would do so by her late teens or early twenties, and despite Procopius' unpleasant comments it is clear that Theodora did 'make it'.

Successful actresses had quite a lot of money. In 393, the reigning emperor had ordered that actresses not wear gold set with gems and should avoid going about in purple clothes – though if they wanted, they could dress in other fine silks and wear gold without gems (in other words, they shouldn't go about looking like the empress). In Antioch, a story circulated about a famous actress with the stage name of Margarito (the pearl) whom the bishop is said to have approached as she was riding an ass while wearing gold, pearls, and precious stones (even on her feet) with an entourage of boys and girls who were all wearing golden collars. He convinced her to give up her lavish lifestyle and convert to Christianity under her birth name, Pelagia (she became a saint in this fictional tale).

> "Successful actresses had quite a lot of money. In 393, the reigning emperor had ordered that actresses not wear gold set with gems and should avoid going about in purple clothes – though if they wanted, they could dress in other fine silks and wear gold without gems.

Whether the local bishop liked it or not, women who made a good deal of money mingled with important men. It was in her early twenties that Theodora left the stage to take up with a senior imperial official named Hecebolus and accompanied him to the province he would govern as his concubine since, at that point, actresses were forbidden to marry men of high status. She wasn't the only actress to form a relationship with an up-and-coming official in this period. Her friend Antonina took up with Belisarius, who would soon become the empire's preeminent military figure. The striking thing about these relationships, which are not unparalleled in earlier periods – Cicero professed horror at being seated next to a mime actress named Volumnia (then Mark Antony's mistress) at a dinner party – is what it says about the economic and cultural attainment of these women. A successful actress was on a cultural and economic par with the upper echelon of imperial society.

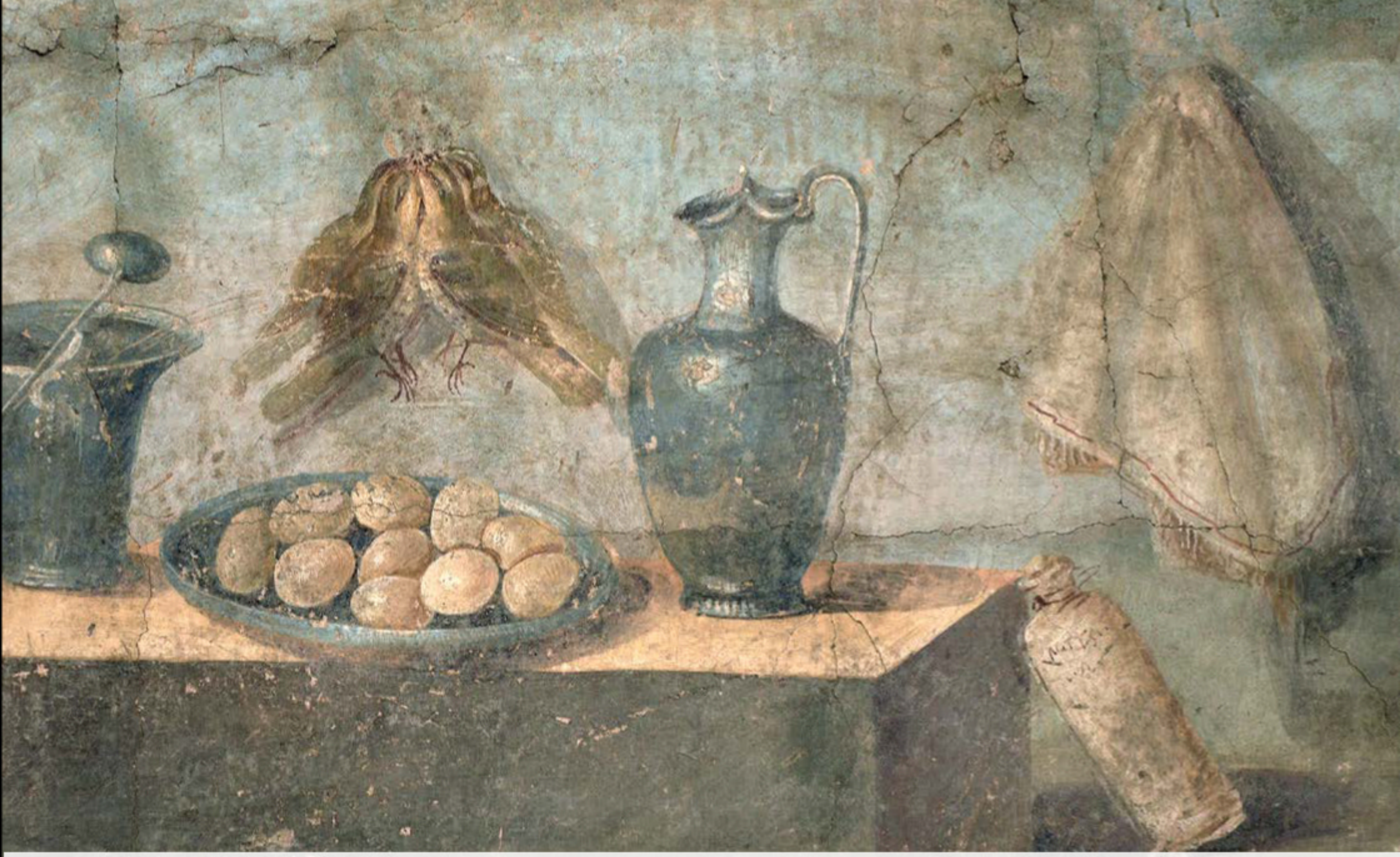
The ability of an actress to contract a legal marriage with a high-status male arose from the specific circumstances of Theodora's life. Hecebolus dumped her after she had a child, and she moved to Antioch, where she found employment as a spy in the Blue Faction, through which she had attained her reputation as an actress. By 521 Justinian, then heir to the imperial throne, had fallen head over heels in love with her, and this smart, beautiful woman was not going to be mistreated again. Justinian convinced his uncle, the emperor Justin, to pass a law allowing an actress who 'repented' of her evil ways to contract a legal marriage. Antonina could then marry Belisarius, and as a mother's repentance enabled her daughter to marry a person of high status, Theodora's daughter would marry the heir of a previous emperor, Anastasius; her sister's daughter, Sophia, would become the next empress. That was a hard act to follow.

Concerned Christians

That actresses could gain such high positions in society was clearly a great concern to Christians of the period. While sexuality of both men and women was generally condemned by the early Christian church, in early Christian writings desire was often personified as a woman, such as in the *Life of Anthony*, who is considered the father of monastic asceticism, from the late fourth century, where the earliest experience of temptation is the devil in the guise of a seductress. Women who maintained their virginity, on the other hand, were glorified. John Chrysostom, for example, records how a woman of Antioch, also called Pelagia, threw herself off a roof rather than lose her virginity.

Given Christians' concerns regarding sexuality and the prominence of actresses and prostitutes in later Roman society, it should come as no surprise that tales of such women repenting were common in early Christian writings. In addition to Pelagia of Antioch, other famous repentant courtesans included Mary of Egypt and Thaïs. There are many different versions of the repentance of these women, such as Mary of Egypt being said to have walked on the waters of the River Jordan, attesting to their popularity in the early Christian world. The idolization of repentant courtesans might explain how Justinian convinced his uncle to pass the law – which stresses repentance as the reason why an actress should be allowed to marry – so that he could marry Theodora. **AH**

David Potter is Francis W. Kelsey Collegiate Professor of Greek and Roman History and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor at the University of Michigan.



One of a group of food-based still life frescoes from Pompeii depicting eggs, a group of dead partridges hanging on the wall, and several bronze vessels.

PARTRIDGE EGGS FOR NON-ELITE POMPEIIANS?

YOU CAN SIT WITH US

By Sean Mowbray

Today most of us might associate partridges with a pear tree – a curious combination as these birds aren't known for their flight. In the ancient Roman world, these often plump, medium-sized birds may have elicited a whole different range of thoughts and feelings, depending on your social standing.

"Trogus Pompeius tells us that … wild partridges, when newly caught, or when beaten by the others, are trodden promiscuously by the tame ones," Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Historia Naturalis* in the first century AD among the many thousands of ancient facts he left us. Intriguingly, this indicates that partridges were domesticated before or during Pliny's time.

Enamoured by partridges

Partridges also appear on Roman mosaics and thus may have been kept as ancient pets, sources of amusement, or as the centrepiece of a feast. Aside from Pliny's recounting of Trogus Pompeius' wisdom, we do have some indication of deeper relationships with partridges. During the middle of the second century AD, Cornelius Fronto – senator, orator, and tutor to the imperial household – scrawled a letter to Aufidius Victorinus, his son-in-law: "… as for how much I am gripped by an enthusiasm for partridges, there is no one, even those who only know me a little, who doesn't know about it." Exactly why Fronto was enamoured with partridges, and what he did with them, remains a mystery. All his friends and acquaintances appear to have known the answer, but alas, we likely never will.

Remains of eggshells from Boscoreale, 1 km away from Pompeii. Boscoreale was also covered in a volcanic layer in AD 79, through which many items were preserved.

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Meanwhile, *De re coquinaria*, an ancient Roman recipe book attributed to Marcus Gavius Apicius, records several ways to cook partridge in the first century AD. One dish combines the bird's meat with pepper, mint, berries, honey, and wine. As tasty as this sounds, it appears that partridge would only make it to your gullet if you were a wealthy Roman. Between the first and second centuries AD, the sharp-tongued poet Marcus Valerius Martialis – otherwise known as Martial – wrote rather scoldingly of the rich and their penchant for partridge in his twelve-book *Epigrams*: "This bird is placed as a great rarity

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upon Roman tables. It is only at those of the rich that you taste it frequently."

Eggs for the plebs?

Recent evidence from Pompeii, however, suggests that more than just the elites may have enjoyed partridge – just not in an equal fashion. In a study published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, Volume 41, researchers conducted an analysis of avian eggshells found in the preserved ruins of Pompeii.

These remains were plucked from Region VIII, Insula 7. This area is known as a non-elite or 'working class' neighbourhood of Pompeii, found next to the town's theatre.

Rather unsurprisingly, chicken eggs (from *Gallus gallus domesticus*) made up the vast majority of those shells examined. Chickens and their eggs were widely consumed in the ancient Roman world. Curiously, however, they also identified a not insignificant amount – around thirteen per cent – as partridge eggs.

A Roman gold finger ring dated to AD 1 – 200, with a sardonyx cameo depicting a partridge.

© The Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

Ancient authors are silent on the raising of partridges specifically for eggs, the study notes. "This is surprising since the presence of so many eggs, many showing significant evidence of embryogenesis, indicates the possibility of partridge being raised for food," the authors write. These signs of embryogenesis essentially indicate that at least some of the eggs were fertilized by a partridge *in situ*, rather than merely picked up in the wild, though it remains possible that others were poached from wild bird nests.

These findings shed light on a possible dietary distinction in ancient Pompeii before Vesuvius popped: elites may have dined on rich, succulent partridge meat, while farmers or non-elites made do with their eggs. Farmers probably did raise partridges for meat, the study states, but not on a scale comparable to chickens or pigeons. Furthermore, the lack of any partridge bones among the other findings suggests that whoever was farming the birds may have profited from the bird eggs before sending their meat to market.

"Perhaps raising partridges for meat was a strategy of poorer Pompeiians, which could explain the prevalence of embryogenesis in the partridge eggshells, who consumed only the eggs but occasionally sold the meat for higher prices," the authors suggest. It is possible that partridge farmers could also have sold the eggs to the poorer citizens.

So, while the Frontos of the Roman world fawned over their partridges and the Apiciuses gorged on their elaborate meat dishes, were non-elite Romans making do with their eggs? A definitive answer may not be possible, but the available evidence certainly seems to point in that direction. We may never know the names of the farmers or those who dwelled in the homes where eggs were found, but we may just understand a bit better about what they had for dinner. **AH**

Sean Mowbray is based in Geneva, Switzerland, and has a passion for all things ancient.

A sandstone grave relief of a butcher's shop, dated to the third century AD, found in Trier, northern Germany. It was first part of a square tomb, but later reworked as a sarcophagus.

© Livius.org

A Roman mosaic from Pompeii depicting the 'Thief Partridge'. In this mosaic, dated to ca. 130 BC, a partridge stands on the lid of an open basket, and steals the mirror inside it. Patridges must have been a common sight in Pompeii.

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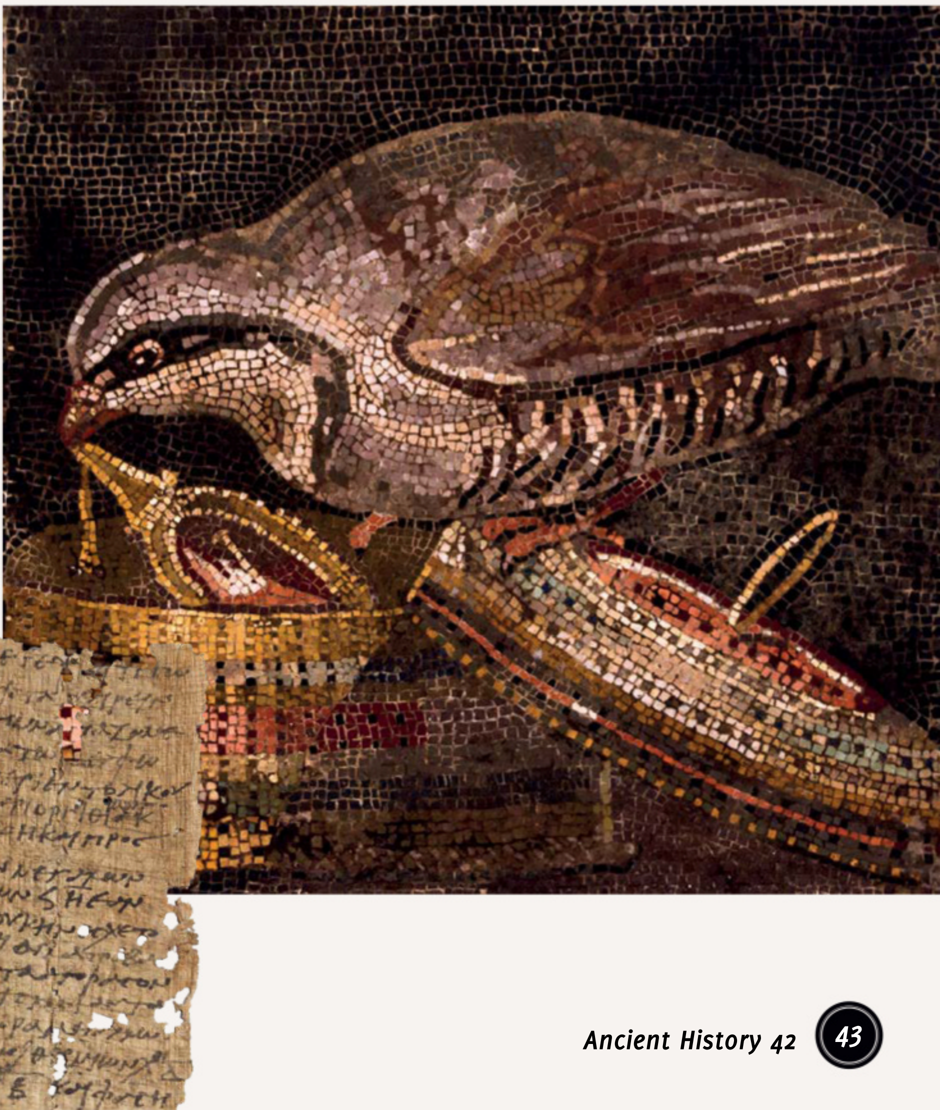
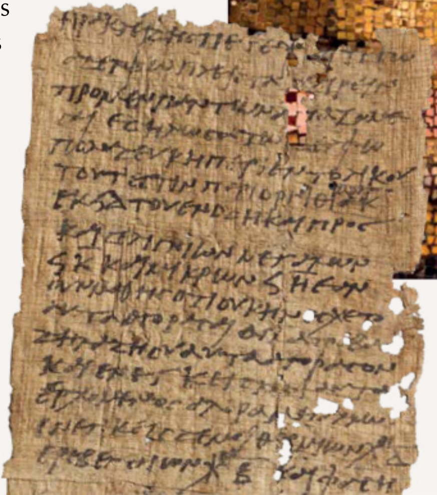
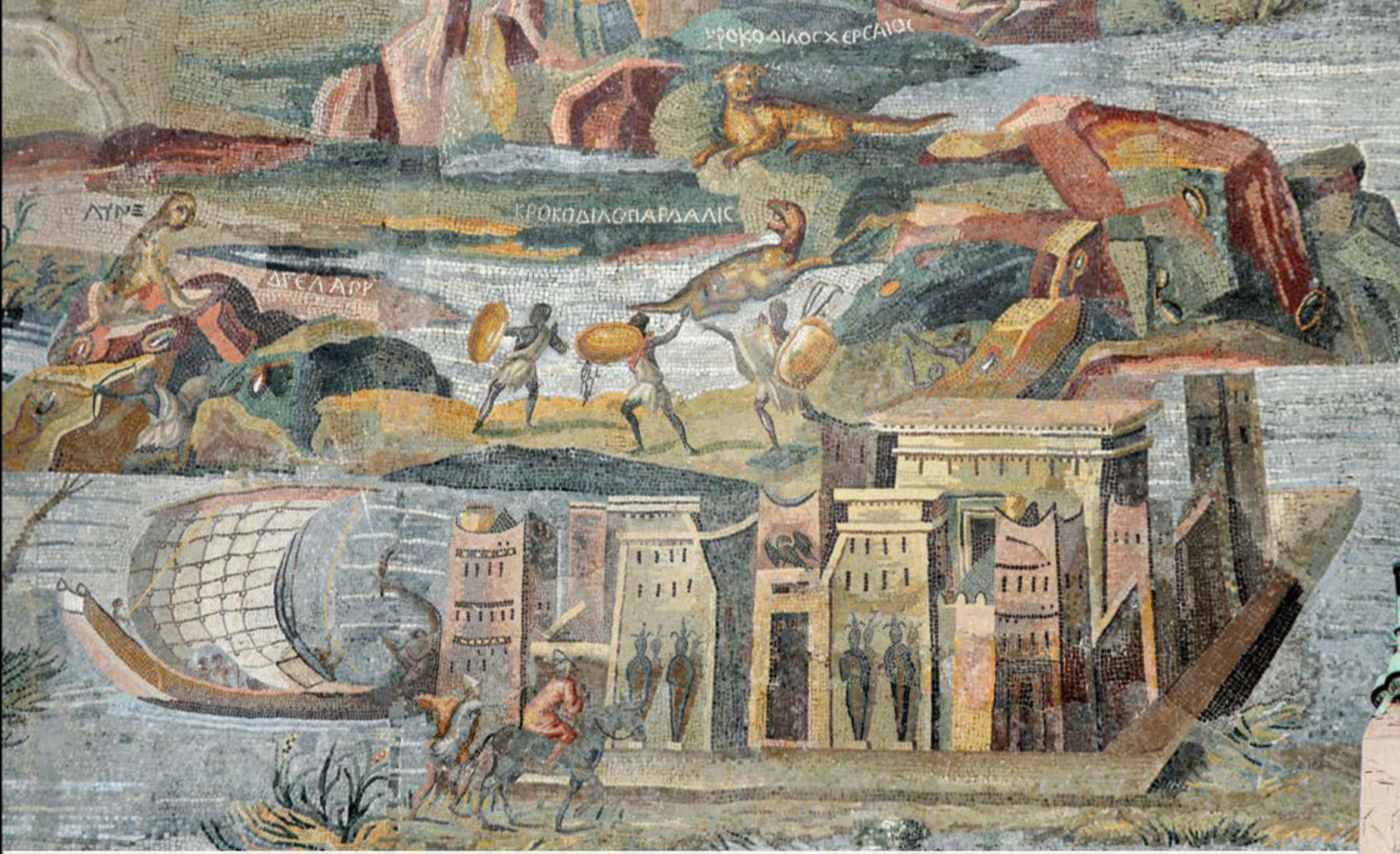




A piece of papyrus from the third century AD, upon which a man called Heraclides wrote to his brother Petechois, asking him to purchase a number of food items, including poultry.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



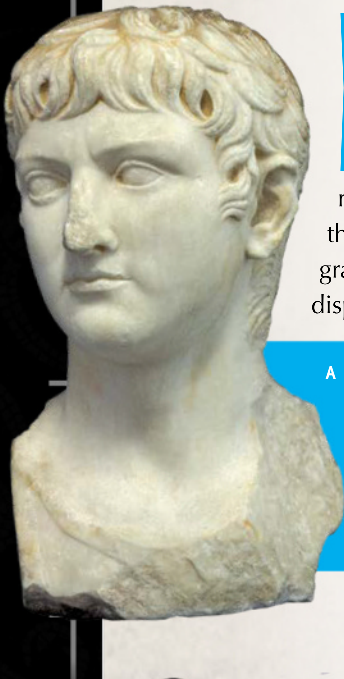
Detail from a mosaic in the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia in Praeneste depicting a boat on the river Nile, as well as possible temples and palaces.

A ROMAN VIP TOURS SIGHTS ON THE NILE

By Lindsay Powell

GERMANICUS IN EGYPT

Egypt was already ancient when the Romans annexed the kingdom in 30 BC. Then as now, visitors went, eager to see its wonders. Germanicus Caesar was one of them. How he was received and what sights he saw on his month-long tour in the summer of AD 19 is recorded in enough detail for us to be able to retrace his steps.



A bust of Germanicus. The 'crab-claw' or 'swallow-tail' hair identifies the figure as belonging to the Julio-Claudian dynasty.
© Xavier Caré / Wikimedia Commons

By AD 18, Germanicus Julius Caesar (b. 24 May 16 BC) was Rome's most popular commander and the darling of the Roman people. The adopted son of his uncle, the emperor Tiberius Caesar, Germanicus had led campaigns against Arminius of the Cherusci with some success and had since been granted the high honour of a triumph. Tiberius then dispatched him to Syria as his consul general (*praepositus Orienti*) to oversee affairs in the eastern provinces and root out malpractice, which was endemic in local administrations.

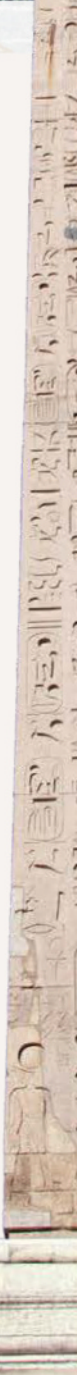
Tour of duty

En route, Germanicus sojourned at Nicopolis to view the battle site of Actium where, in 31 BC, Augustus (his adoptive grandfather) had fought Marcus Antonius (his grandfather on his mother's side). He stopped at Olympia and won first place in a race of four-horse chariots (*tethrippon*) in the 199th Olympiad. In the weeks following, he personally crowned the pro-Roman Zenon as King Artaxias at Artaxata, Armenia in a calculated move against Rome's nemesis, Parthia; he also delivered new governors to Cappadocia and Commagene.

Arriving in Antioch, Germanicus – now aged 34 – needed rest and recreation. He chose to visit Egypt "to study its antiquities" (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.59). In the height of the summer of AD 19, he boarded a trireme at Seleucia on the Orontes and sailed south, accompanied by his entourage and Praetorian guardsmen.

Unofficial business

Having disembarked in Alexandria, Germanicus was soon fêted by crowds of well-wish-



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ers and adoring fans. He immediately published two edicts: one banned unauthorized requisitions from being issued in his name; the second refused salutations addressing him as a god. In response to decrees published in his honour, Germanicus felt obliged to give a public speech.

Remarkably, a verbatim record of that speech in Greek survives on a papyrus (known as *P.Oxy*. XXV 2435). In the transcription Germanicus is referred to as the *imperator*, 'commander':

> *The* **imperator***: "I who was sent by my father, men of Alexandria –"*
>
> *The crowd called out: "Hurrah! Lord! Good luck! Good things will come to you."*
>
> *The* **imperator***: "You, men of Alexandria, who have pressed me to address you, restrain your cheering until I have finished dealing with each of your requests. I who was sent by my father, as I said, to make arrangements in the provinces across the sea, a very difficult assignment, in the first place because of the sea voyage, and because it has torn me away from my father [sc. Tiberius Caesar] and grandmother [sc. Livia Drusilla] and mother [sc. Antonia Minor] and brothers and sisters and children and close friends [unclear passage] a new sea in order in the first place to see your city –"*
>
> *The crowd called out: "Good luck!"*
>
> *The* **imperator***: "I already imagined it to be a very splendid sight, in the first place because of your hero and founder [sc. Alexander the Great], to whom a kind of debt joins those who support the same [sc. anti-Persian] values, and then because of the benefactions made by my grandfather Augustus and my father [unclear passage]. And I do not speak –"*
>
> *The crowd called out: "Oh! May your life be longer!"*
>
> *The* **imperator***: "– of what everyone knows, but I am mindful that I have found these [honours] to be multiplied by being treasured in your hearts. For honorary decrees can be drawn up in meetings of a few men, but ..."*

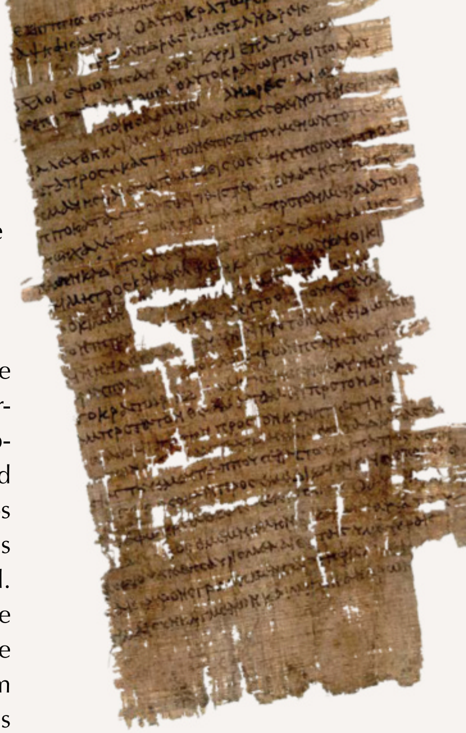
...at which point the text abruptly ends.

There was a problem, however. A government official from Rome was not authorized to enter Egypt without first obtaining the express permission of the *princeps* – Tiberius – in a practice established by Augustus. As a major producer of grain for Rome's poor, the emperor's equestrian-grade representative in Egypt (*praefectus Aegypti*) needed to perform his duties without interruption. Unapproved visits by officials to the province could be seen as meddling or disruptive. Perhaps Germanicus took the trip on impulse, but it is clear that he had not observed the protocol. Germanicus exacerbated the issue when he opened the granaries and reduced the price of wheat to feed Egyptians suffering from famine: it was not his call to make. Tiberius sharply censured his son for his gross error of judgment (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.59).

Germanicus felt very comfortable in cosmopolitan Alexandria; he "would go about without soldiers, with sandalled feet, and apparelled after the Greek fashion" (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.59). The pull of the Nile River now tugged at him: it was time to explore its treasures. At Canopus on a tributary of the Nile River in the Delta, Germanicus boarded a waiting ship. In the *Annals*, Tacitus provides an account of the sights he saw on his trip along the river.

Pyramids and temples

The first stop was Heracleum (Thonis), the now submerged city on "the river's nearest mouth" (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.60). The city was dedicated to Hercules as the hero was alleged to have landed in Egypt there.



Papyrus fragment P.Oxy.XXV 2435, dated to the early first century AD, recording a *verbatim* of a speech given by Germanicus when he was Alexandria. In his speech, Germanicus praises the city of Alexandria and its many monuments.

© Oxyrhynchus online

This relief from Praeneste, Italy, depicts the battle of Actium, one of the most decisive battles in Roman history. Germanicus, at the start of his journey to the east, visited the site of the battle.

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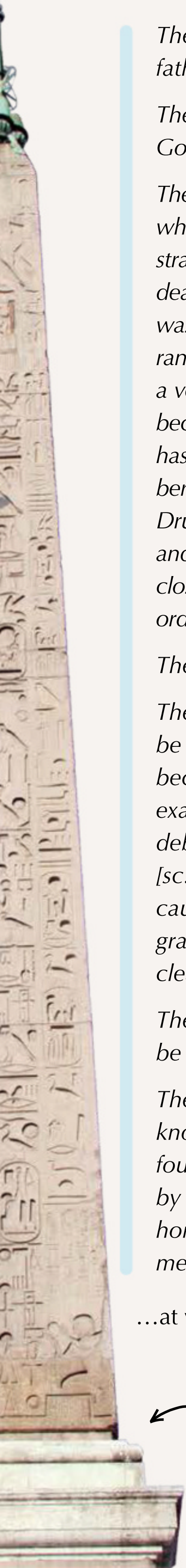
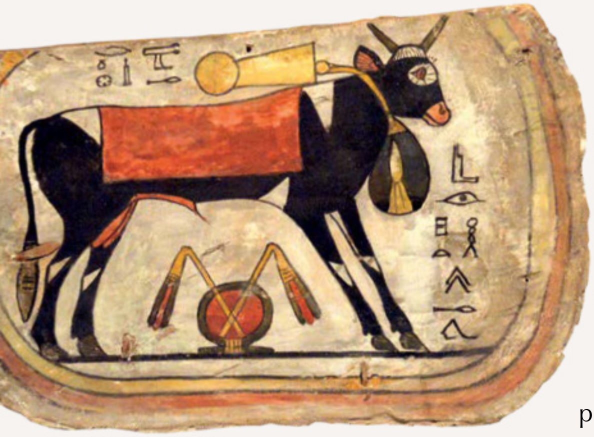


Many obelisks once stood in Heliopolis, the 'City of the Sun' – also known as Iwnw, 'the Pillars' in Egyptian – such as this one of Psamtik II, which was taken back to Rome by Augustus.

© Gary Todd / Flickr

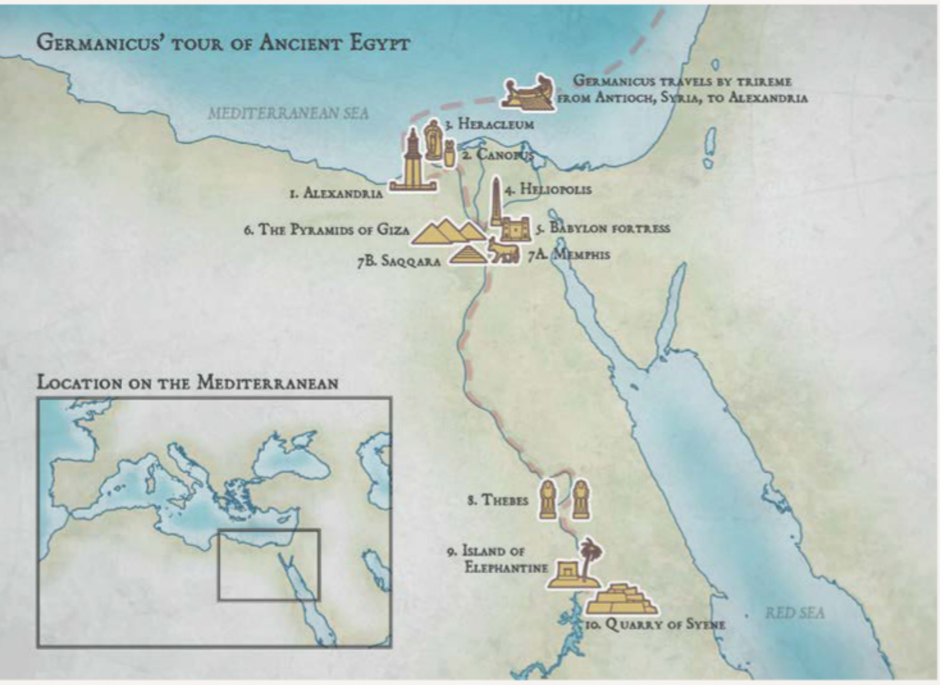


A painted wooden coffin footboard depicting an Apis Bull. Dated between the eighth and fourth centuries BC. Worship of the Apis Bull was an incredibly ancient practice in Egypt, possibly beginning in the First Dynasty, if not earlier. The distinctive markings that identified the Apis Bull can be seen on this depiction.

© Neuroforever / Wikimedia Commons

Germanicus made many stops along his trip through Egypt. This map shows the route he took, starting at Alexandria before heading south along the Nile to Elephantine and Syene.

© Richard Thomson



Sailing upstream on the Nile, Germanicus passed the deserted city of Heliopolis on the port side, with its nome and temple to Helios. One of its red granite obelisks had been removed by Augustus and shipped to Rome just a few years before Germanicus passed the spot. (It now stands in the Piazza Montecitorio, Rome; the other stands within Al-Masalla in Al-Matariyyah, Cairo).

Further on, Germanicus sailed past Babylon Fortress (Cairo), formerly the base of one of the three Roman legions stationed in Egypt.

Soon the pyramids came into view on the starboard side. They were already 2600 years old when Germanicus saw them – a longer period of time than separates Germanicus' visit to the Giza Plateau and our own day. Visitors, then as now, were awed by the sight: Tacitus writes of "the pyramids, rising up like mountains amid almost impassable wastes of shifting sand, raised by the emulation and vast wealth of kings" (*Annals* 2.61).

How they were built perplexed inquiring minds such as Pliny the Elder's: the techniques and methods used by the Egyptian engineers had been lost long before the Romans emerged.

Apis Bull

The entourage sailed on to Memphis (Saqqara, Mit Rahina), the original residence of the pharaohs. Germanicus found temples to the Apis Bull, Hephaestus, and Serapis in one of the largest temple complexes in the country.

The Apis Bull was believed to be able to predict the future. This gifted bull was distinguished from its peers by several particular markings on its hide, including a crescent shape on its right side. It lived in a chamber all by itself and was treated with the greatest reverence. However, the Apis Bull was not allowed to live the full length of its natural life. Instead, it was drowned in a sacred fountain amid great public mourning and only replaced by a new animal after a time-consuming search.

One Roman historian reports that Germanicus approached the consecrated bull in person as a supplicant hoping for favourable portents. He was surprised – and disappointed – when "he offered the animal food and it turned away from him, which all took to mean that it prophesied misfortune in his future" (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman Antiquities* 22.14.8).

Thebes

Some 670 kilometres (416 miles) south of Alexandria, Germanicus reached Thebes (Luxor and Karnak), also known by its Greek name Diospolis Megale ('Great City of God'). There an Egyptian priest, reading from ancient inscriptions, told Germanicus of the achievements of Ramesses II, the people he had conquered and the vast tribute they supplied. Having himself negotiated with the king of Parthia and his representatives, the tale would have had particular resonance for Germanicus – the second most powerful man in Rome.

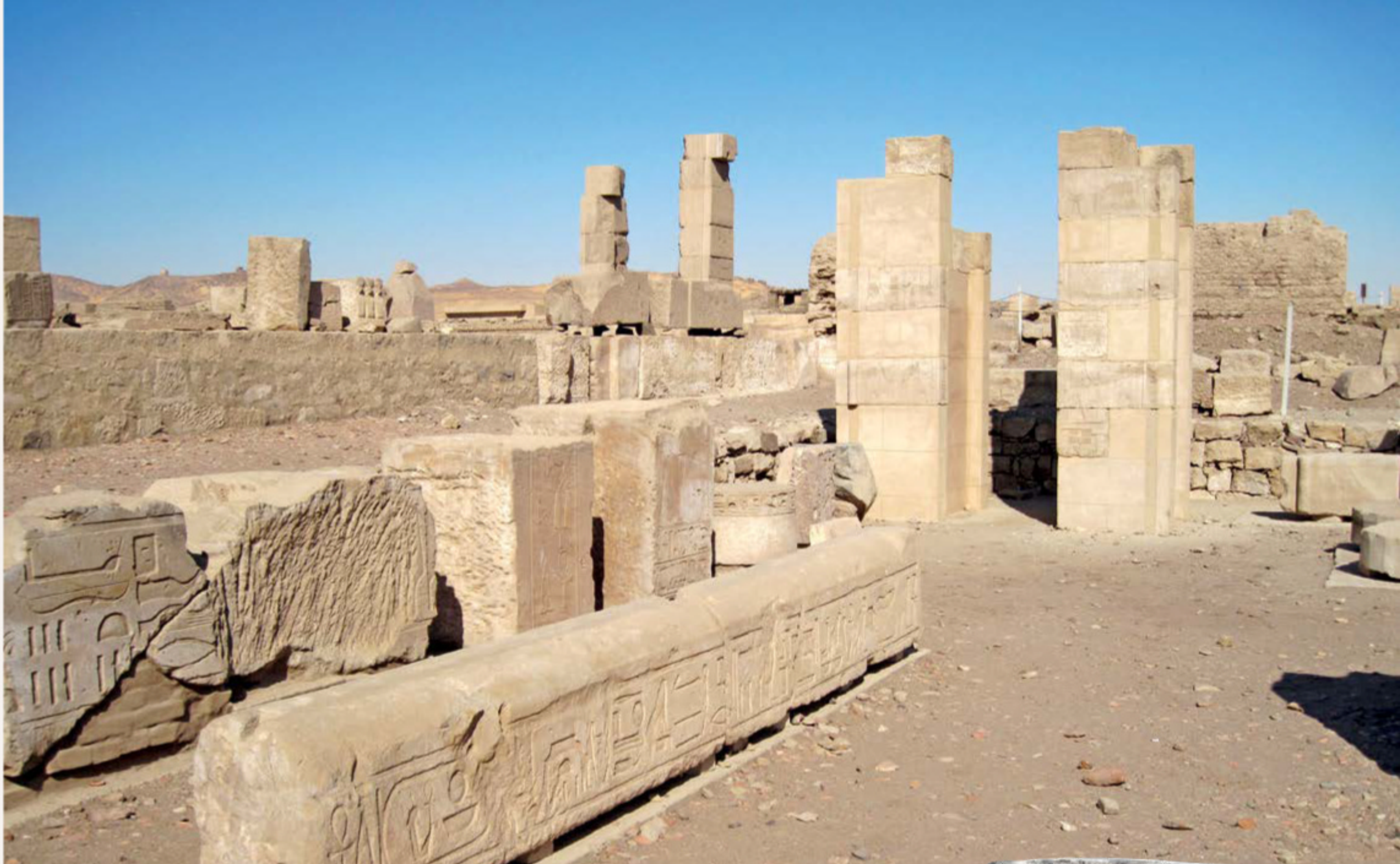
Colossi of Memnon

More surprises lay in wait for the Roman traveller. The remains of thirty-six temples, the most famous of which was the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III, held a curiosity. The entrance to the ruined complex was guarded by two colossal statues of the seated pharaoh, each nearly eighteen metres (59 feet) high.

> *Chief of these were the stone image of Memnon,*

One of the two so-called Colossi of Memnon: two large stone sculptures of Amenhotep III from ca. 1350 BC that once stood in front of his temple in Thebes.

© Manar al-Athar



> *which, when struck by the sun's rays, gives out the sound of a human voice …*
> (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.61)

Many Romans came to this place to hear the otherworldly noise emanating from the stone figures. Some 107 Roman-era inscriptions in Greek and Latin, dating to between AD 20 and 250, have been found scratched into the blocks of quartzite sandstone.

Journey's end

Germanicus continued on his journey:

> *He then came to Elephantine and Syene, formerly the limits of the Roman Empire, which now extends to the Red Sea*
> (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.61).

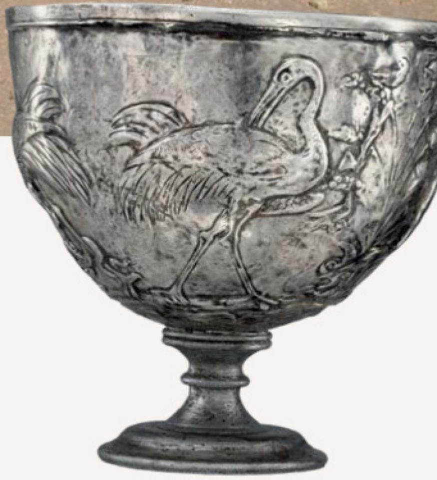
Elephantine is an island in the Nile; it was then home to the ram-headed god of the cataphracts. Syene (Aswan) was quarried for the beautiful granite used in monuments and buildings all over Egypt and the Roman world.

Germanicus was now about 800 kilometres (497 miles) away from Alexandria. He was urgently needed back in Syria. Reports reached him that the provincial governor, Cn. Calpurnius Piso, was ignoring or revoking his orders. It is thought that one reason why Tiberius sent Germanicus out to the East was to keep the old Roman in check.

Germanicus left Egypt in good spirits but, arriving in Antioch, he fell seriously ill. Perhaps he had taken a virus with him to Syria. The resulting sickness worsened. Initially he seemed to respond to treatment, but then he regressed. Hardly a month after leaving the land of the pyramids, on 10 October AD 19, Germanicus was dead (see *AH* 24: 'Ancient Rome's 'JFK Moment': The Death of Germanicus Caesar').

The memory of cheers and shouting of multitudes in Alexandria was shattered by the tears and wailing of mourners in Antioch. The Apis Bull's prediction had been proved right. **AH**

Lindsay Powell is news editor of* Ancient History *and* Ancient Warfare. *He is the author of* Germanicus: The Magnificent Life and Mysterious Death of Rome's Most Popular General, *Pen and Sword Books (2021).

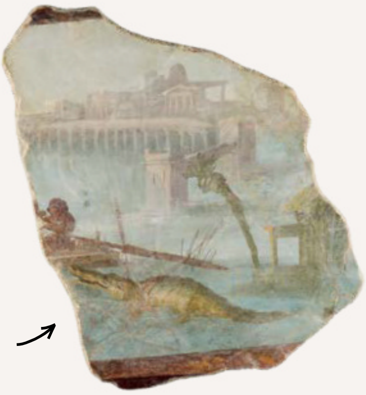


(Top) One of the last stops of Germanicus' journey was the island of Elephantine, home to the Egyptian god of the Cataracts: the ram-headed Khnum. The ruins of the god's temple can still be seen today.

© Oltau / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom) Dating to ca. 25 BC - AD 50, this silver Roman cup was made in Alexandria and depicts a number of cranes grooming themselves and hunting for snakes in the marshes of the Nile.

© The J. Paul Getty Museum



Fragment of a Roman fresco, dated between AD 1 - 79, depicting a Nilotic landscape with a portico in the background and a crocodile staring at a pygmy seated in a boat. Pygmies were a legendary dwarf-like people who lived in far-away lands. The Greeks believed that Pygmies south of Egypt fought with cranes who migrated to their lands from Scythia.

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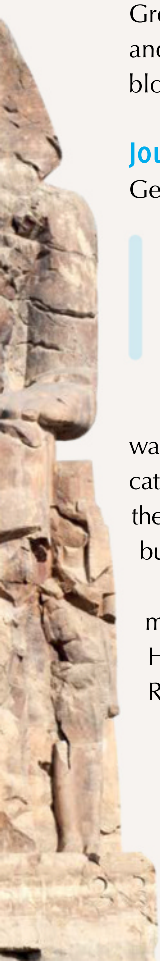


BITTER AND BIZARRE OR LIKE AMBROSIA?

EATING FLOWER BULBS IN ANTIQUITY

In antiquity, various flower bulbs were eaten and used in medicine. Sea squill and tassel hyacinth or *lampascioni* (muscari comosum) were favourites. According to ancient writers, bulbs were valued for three properties: as an aphrodisiac, as a medical remedy, and as a delicacy.

By Manon Henzen

© Jeroen Savelkouls

Quite a variety of flower bulbs were eaten or used in antiquity, even poisonous tubers. The menu or medicine cabinet included arum, lily (both poisonous!), grape hyacinth, and tassel hyacinth.

Potent panacea

The most loved flower was sea squill. Ancient authors mainly wrote about its role as an aphrodisiac and praised its medical properties. They were considered very helpful for many conditions. Among other things, drinks and infusions were made from the juice of the bulbs. For example, sea squill was used to flavour wine or vinegar for medical purposes. Both Hippocrates (460–370 BC) and Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) described the properties of sea squill.

Consuming bulbs as an aphrodisiac was also a widespread practice. Ancient authors such as Ovid (43 BC–AD 17) and Varro (116–27 BC) wrote about it. In the *Satyricon*, Petronius (27–66 AD) gives a funny passage that talks about the flower bulb as a means of combating impotence: for that you apparently need "Flower bulbs and snail necks without sauce, with a little pure wine."

The *Satyricon* isn't being serious. Between the lines, however, the work says a great deal about Roman food culture. The bizarre food and eating habits described in the satire relate to what we know from other ancient sources.

Luxury delicacy

The flower bulb was a delicacy in ancient times. The elite put it on the table to express their status and to have a special bite to eat. Because of the decadent character of this ingredient, eating flower bulbs was criticized. Athenaeus of Naucratis (second century AD) indicated that they tasted like nothing. He says that it takes a lot of (expensive) ingredients to give it some taste, suggesting that the flower bulb was eaten for its peculiarity, status, and cost rather than for its taste.

Athenaeus may rail against eating flower bulbs, but in doing so, he provides a 'recipe' of sorts: "Look, if you will, at the bulbs, and see what a waste it takes for its reputation – cheese, honey, sesame seeds, olive oil, onion, vinegar, silphium. Taken by itself, it's dull and bitter."

Athenaeus is not the only author to give a 'recipe' for preparing flower bulbs. The physician Galen (AD 129–199) mentions, among other things, a flower bulb and lentil soup (called *bolbohake*) that would give a warm feeling. A saying by the philosopher Chryssipus of Soli (280 – 207 BC) reads: "Bulb and lentil soup is like ambrosia when the weather is cold."

Most recipes for flower bulbs can be found in *De re coquinaria*, attributed to Marcus Gavius Apicius (first century AD). In his book, bulbs are clearly a luxury food and are recommended as an aphrodisiac. Many luxurious ingredients are used to flavour the bulbs. Here's one of the recipes: "Boil the flower bulbs and press them in a *pultarium* [pan]. Add thyme, oregano, honey, vinegar, defrutum, dates, garum and a little oil. Sprinkle with pepper and serve."

Eating flower bulbs today

Some flower bulbs are still eaten today – and are a delicacy too. *Lampascioni* or tassel hyacinth, an antipasto in Italy, is hard to get. To make Roman bulb recipes, you can use tulip bulbs as an alternative. The Romans didn't know about tulips yet! But these bulbs are a delicious 'forgotten' vegetable, easy to get, easy to clean, and safe to eat. Please, always use ORGANIC bulbs – regular flower bulbs are heavily sprayed with pesticides! **AH**

Manon Henzen is a culinary historian and writer. Check out more of her articles and historical recipes at: www. Eat-history.com.

Flower bulbs with date sauce

Ingredients

- 10 ORGANIC tulip bulbs
- 6 dates
- ½ tsp thyme
- ½ tsp oregano
- 1 tbsp honey
- 1 tbsp wine vinegar
- 2 tbsp *defrutum** or sweet wine
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- ½ tbsp *garum* (fish sauce)
- freshly ground black or long pepper

Preparation

Clean the tulip bulbs: remove the brown skin and cut off the bottom. Cut each bulb in half. Take out the small (bitter) core and discard. Separate the different layers of the halved bulbs. Rinse the pieces well with water.

Cook the pieces for 30 seconds in gently boiling water and then rinse immediately with cold water to prevent them from cooking any more.

Add the dates with the thyme and oregano to a mortar or small food processor and grind to a paste. Next, add honey, vinegar, *defrutum* (or the sweet wine), oil, and *garum* and stir until smooth.

Place the flower bulbs in a bowl and pour the sauce over them. Mix together. Sprinkle with freshly ground pepper before serving. Or use the sauce as a dip.

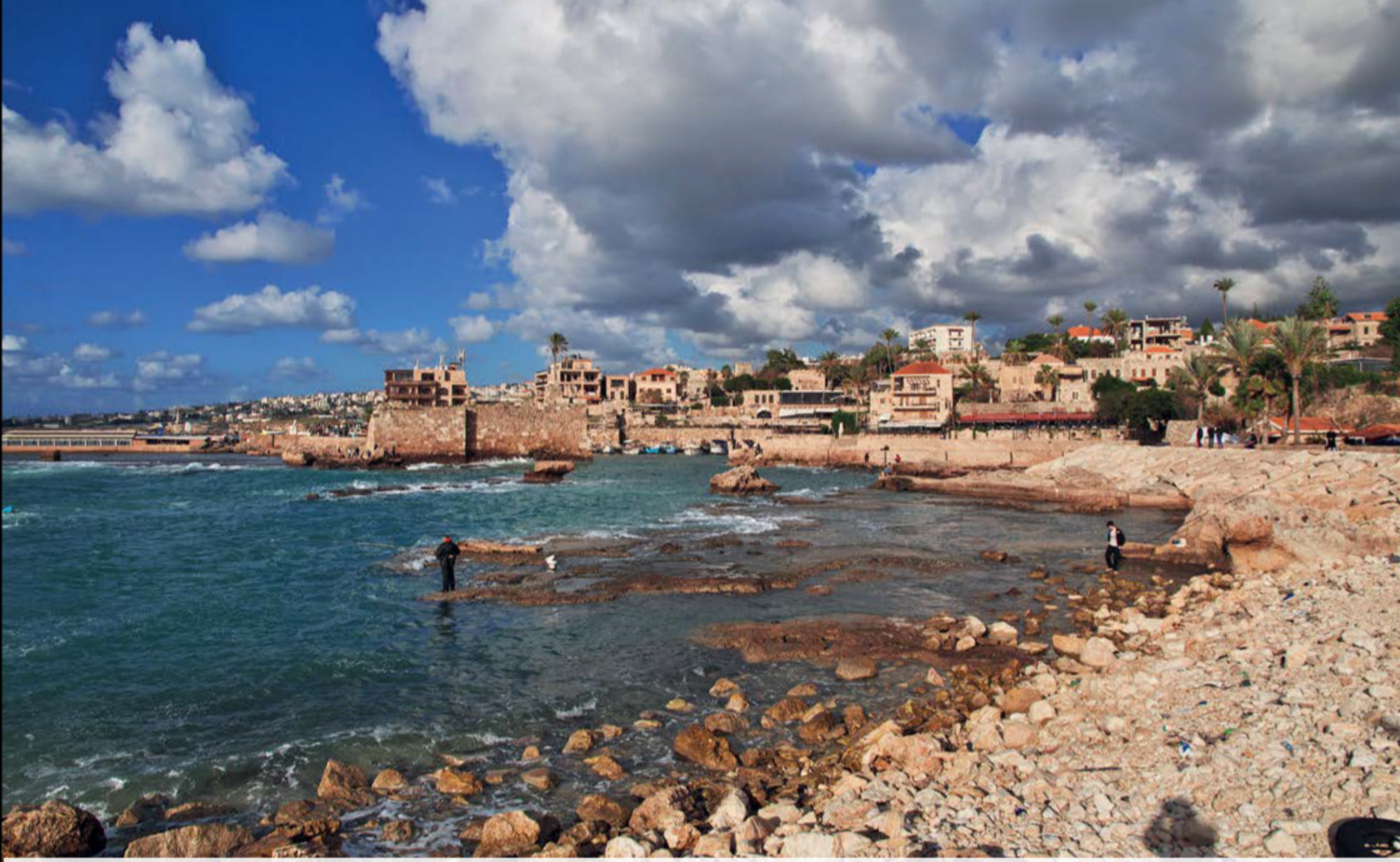
An alternative preparation

Preheat the oven to 180 degrees.

Clean the flower bulbs and make the sauce. Mix the raw flower bulb pieces with the sauce and place in a greased oven dish.

Bake the dish in the oven for about 20 minutes, until the sauce forms a lovely sticky sweet layer on the flower bulbs. Sprinkle with pepper and serve.

**Defrutum is boiled-down grape must. You can easily make it yourself by boiling one litre of pure grape juice down to about a third of its volume. The longer you let the juice boil, the sweeter, more syrupy, and smokier it will be.*



The ruins of Byblos' ancient port, with the modern city visible in the background. The Lebanese believe it to be the oldest surviving port in the world.

HOW THE LEBANESE INVENTED INTERNATIONAL TRADE

By David Kertai

BYBLOS, THE FIRST PORT

Situated on the Mediterranean shores near a cedar forest, Byblos was destined to become the world's first international seaport, a prosperous town, and eventually a holy city.

The sea enables the exchange of goods, people, and ideas over long distances. Without sea trade, the modern world is inconceivable. However, international trade must have originated somewhere, sometime. The Lebanese port of Byblos, modern Jbeil just north of Beirut, appears to have played a crucial role.

Cedars and ships

The fact that sea trade started in Byblos is largely due to the ways its inhabitants parlayed the high demand for cedar wood – a product that can only be transported by sea – into a durable historical prominence. Merchants from Byblos were present when the first pharaohs ruled in ancient Egypt between 3250 and 3000 BC. These pharaohs ordered the construction of monumental temples and tombs, which required huge wooden planks and beams. However, the trees from which these could be made did not grow along the Nile. They had to be imported from the mountains along the eastern Mediterranean shore, the Levant, especially the high mountain range that is called the Lebanon.

The Lebanese cedar is not just any tree. It is one of the few tree species in the Middle East that can reach 40 metres in height. The stems are straight; the wood is light and barely shrinks, has excellent resistance to rot, and is easy to work with. The most vaunted quality of the wood is its pleasant smell, which remains long after the tree has been cut. Flinders Petrie, when excavating a royal burial of Semerkhet, a member of the First Dynasty, said the tomb was still saturated with the perfume, 5000 years after it had been used. Either the smell was incredibly strong or the Egyptians were using huge quantities of it. In

A Hellenistic throne to the goddess Astarte or Lady of Byblos. The relief depicts two figures making a libation under a winged sun and crescent moon.

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© Sergey-73 / Shutterstock

short, cedar wood is ideally suited for the pharaohs' monuments.

Byblos is an ideally located gateway to the Lebanese cedar forest for those coming from Egypt. The city lies at the foot of the mountains, and logs can be transported relatively easily downhill via the nearby Ibrahim River. The arrival of the merchant fleets from Byblos seems to have made such an impression on the Egyptians that they called seaworthy ships 'Byblos ships'.

Iny in Byblos

We know several Egyptian visitors of Byblos by name. The first of these is Iny, whose travels took place during the Old Kingdom (ca. 2543–2120 BC). At that time, Byblos was the undisputed main port of the Mediterranean.

Iny was the pharaoh's seal bearer, one of the most prestigious positions in Egypt, and acted on missions on behalf of Pepi I, Merenre I, and Pepi II, rulers of the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2305–2118 BC). From an autobiographical text found in his tomb, we learn that he obtained lapis lazuli, tin, silver, bitumen, and "Asians", presumably slaves from Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia. These products and people were sent to Egypt from Byblos. Iny writes that he also brought back to Egypt three Byblos ships. In return, Byblos received Egyptian linen, precious stones, gold objects, stone vases, and ivory.

This bronze figurine with pointed hat has traces of its gold sheeting still intact, and presumably represents a god.

© Onceinawhile / Wikimedia Commons

The goddess of Byblos

One of the protagonists in the history of Byblos is a goddess: the Lady of Byblos. She is the answer to the question of how Byblos was able to become the most important trading partner of the pharaohs of Egypt. Her cult also explains how the city could maintain that status even after more port cities had sprung up in the Levant.

What makes the goddess of Byblos so special is that the Egyptians identified her as their own Hathor, the goddess of – among other things – distant lands and trade. The Lady of Byblos had the status of an Egyptian goddess, a position that no other Levantine deity ever achieved.

As the representative of humankind vis-à-vis the deities, the pharaoh was a mortal god. It was unworthy for him to pay for products, but in the Lady of Byblos he found an equal partner with whom he could exchange gifts. In a pre-capitalist age, this was a way to conceptualize something that we would call trade. Thus, for centuries the Lady of Byblos was the glue that bound the relationship between Byblos and the pharaohs: she ensured the success of trade. The Lady of Byblos continued to play a central role in the city's prosperity until Roman times, a period of nearly 3000 years.

Lebanese wood was in high demand in Egypt and used for various purposes, such as coffins. This one, belonging to a person called Senbi from the 12th Dynasty (ca. 1918-1859 BC), is a fine example.

© The Cleveland Museum of Art

An Egyptian style pectoral found in the tomb of King Ipy-Shemu-Abi of Byblos, dated to ca. 1900 - 1700 BC.

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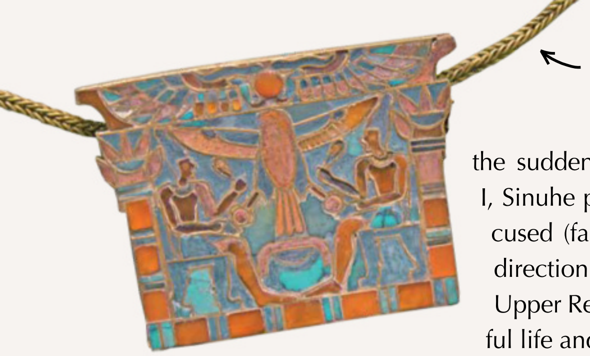
A warrior elite

One of the most famous stories about Byblos is that of Sinuhe, a fictional high official in the Egyptian court around 1950 BC. After

In 1922, a landslide revealed the royal necropolis of Byblos. Tomb 1 belonged to King Abi-shemu I, and his sarcophagus is still in situ.

© Karim Sokhm / Wikimedia Commons



An Egyptian style pectoral which was found in the tomb of King Ipy-Shemu-Abi of Byblos, dated to ca. 1900 – 1700 BC.
© Livius.org

the sudden death of Pharaoh Amenemhat I, Sinuhe panics. Afraid that he will be accused (falsely) of murder, he flees in the direction of Byblos. He ends up in nearby Upper Retenu, where he builds a successful life and is accepted in the local elite.

That Sinuhe joins the elite, indeed is a textbook example of it, is evident from the description of a duel in which he fights one-on-one against an opponent. At this time, a male elite, whose members presented themselves as warriors, was at the top of the social hierarchy. Similar groups can be found throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Typical of these men were their weapons, which consisted of axes, daggers, and lances. Some of these were found in Byblos and are among the most precious of this era. However, the beautiful weapons appear to be more of a status symbol than real weaponry: although razor sharp, they were apparently never used for fighting.

(Top) The buttressed city walls of Byblos date back to ca. 3000 BC, and were rebuilt by the Hyksos who appeared around 1700 BC.
© couscouschocolat / Flickr

(Bottom) In ca. 64 BC, Byblos became part of the Roman Empire. The city was rebuilt and various new buildings arose, such as the *odeon*.
© Fotokon / Shutterstock

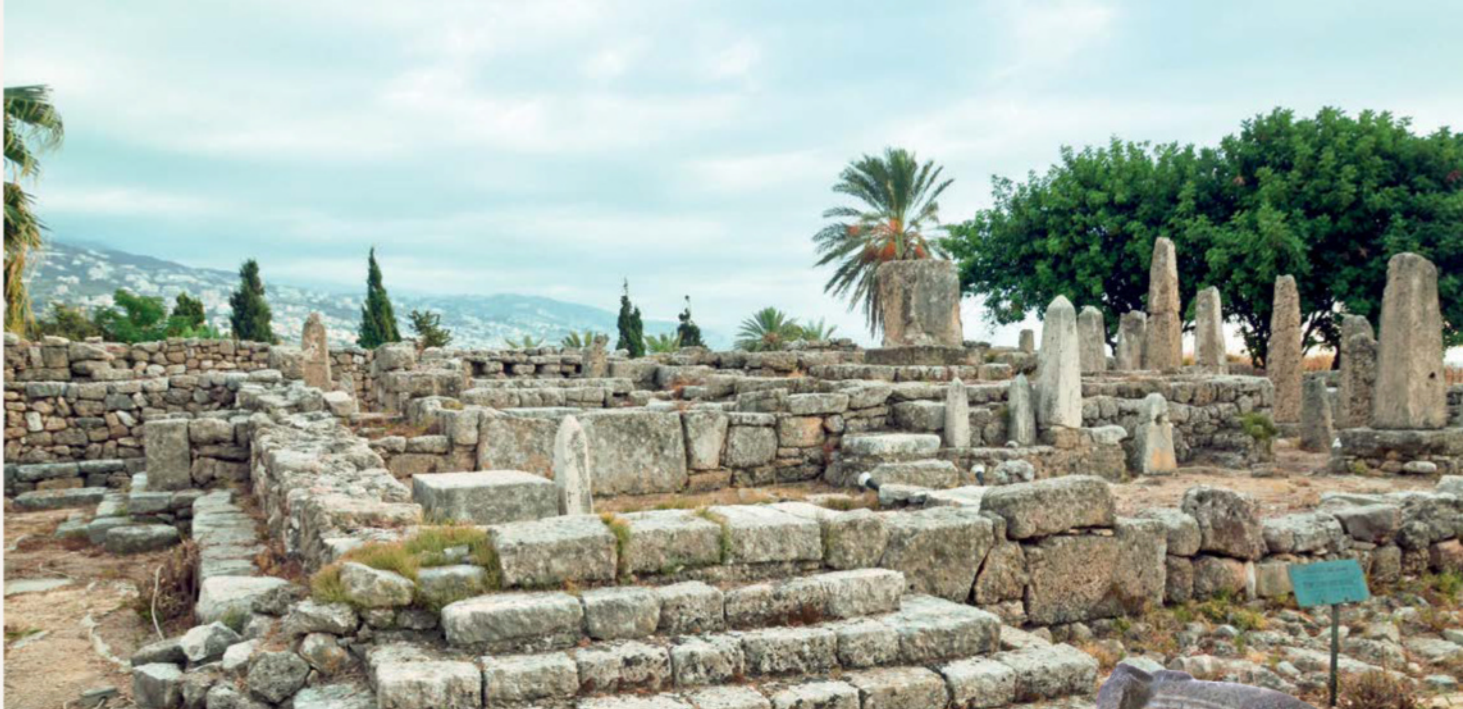
The kings of Byblos

Byblos was ruled by kings, who lived in a palace on the highest hill in the city, next to the temple of the Lady of Byblos. Nowhere is the wealth of Byblos more evident than in their tombs, beneath this royal palace. Two of the tombs were still intact when excavated and filled with riches. ‘Royal Tomb 2’ was the final resting place of King Ipy-Shemu-Abi.

The kings of Byblos employed the special relationship between the pharaohs and the Lady of Byblos to increase their own status amongst the other regional kingdoms. The finds in these tombs clearly show how creatively the kings of Byblos handled the status symbols of the Egyptian pharaohs to enhance their own status. For example, King Ipy-Shemu-Abi had himself depicted as a pharaoh on a pendant found in his tomb, inlaid with carnelian, turquoise, faience, and lapis lazuli. In Egypt itself, this way of presenting oneself would have been considered unbecoming. Similarly, rulers of Byblos also commissioned short inscriptions written in Egyptian hieroglyphs and even held Egyptian official titles. For example, Rib-Hadda, the king of Byblos in the mid-fourteenth century BC, in his correspondence with the Egyptian pharaohs, would present himself as *haty-a*, an Egyptian official (see “The Ummahnu Affair”, *AH* 41, *Egypt During the Amarna Period*).

A script of their own

The inhabitants of Byblos have become famous primarily for their experimentation with writing. This includes the enigmatic and still poorly understood Byblos script. Decipherment is difficult because so far only fourteen inscriptions have been found. This script comprises about one hundred characters, almost certainly representing syllables. It was originally believed to belong to the Middle Bronze Age, but it has recently been redated to the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600-1200 BC).



A carved cedar depiction of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who was identified with the Lady of Byblos.

© The LA County Museum of Art

Byblos also plays an important role in the creation of the Phoenician alphabet. This consists of 22 consonants and would later develop into the Greek alphabet, which also indicates vowels. From there it developed into the Latin alphabet in which this article was written. The Phoenician alphabet was not the oldest alphabet, but it was the first to be used widely. It is in Byblos that the oldest Phoenician texts have been found, which can be dated to around 1100 BC.

Holy city

For centuries, even millennia, the Lady of Byblos remained the leading goddess of Byblos. Her Egyptian connections extended into the Roman period. In these later times, however, she was primarily associated with different deities: for example, the Syrian goddess Astarte. This new equivalence is evidenced by, among other things, two inscriptions on a throne from ca. 300–100 BC. In Greek, it reads “To the great goddess Astarte” and in Phoenician, it says “To the Lady of Byblos”. There is similar evidence for equivalence to the Hellenized Egyptian deity Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus.

Byblos became part of the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean at this time. This is also the period when the city gained its Greek name: Byblos. This refers to a Greek word for papyrus scroll *biblos*. Our words ‘library’ and ‘Bible’ are also derived from this. The papyrus plant growing in Egypt was presumably traded through Byblos.

Around 64 BC, Byblos became part of the Roman Empire. No longer an important port, it had reinvented itself, this time as ‘the Holy City’. On coins, Byblos calls itself *Hierapolis*, and it certainly was a place of pilgrimage.

The ancient city was thoroughly rebuilt and the ancient sanctuaries were replaced by classical-style temple complexes, bathhouses, and an *odeon*. These buildings were connected to new neighbourhoods by monumental streets. Byblos was starting a new phase in its history. But that’s a completely different story. **AH**

David Kertai is curator of the Ancient Near East collections of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden.

(Top) The so-called Temple of the Obelisks in Byblos was dedicated to the Canaanite deity Resheph, god of war and plague, who was incorporated into the Egyptian pantheon.

© Carole Raddato / Flickr

(Bottom) This statue of pharaoh Osorkon I (r. 922-888 B.C.) contains two inscriptions. One is set in a cartouche giving the prenomen of the pharaoh, the other is in Phoenician and was applied by King Eli-Ba’al of Byblos.

© Rama / Wikimedia Commons

A large exhibition focused on ancient Byblos is on view in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden until March 12, 2023. Many objects have been brought together from the collections of the National Museum in Beirut, the Louvre in Paris, and two dozen other museums.

A gold dagger with scabbard showing animals being brought to a man on a donkey. The association with donkeys is typical of the elite of the Bronze Age, although it is not clear why.

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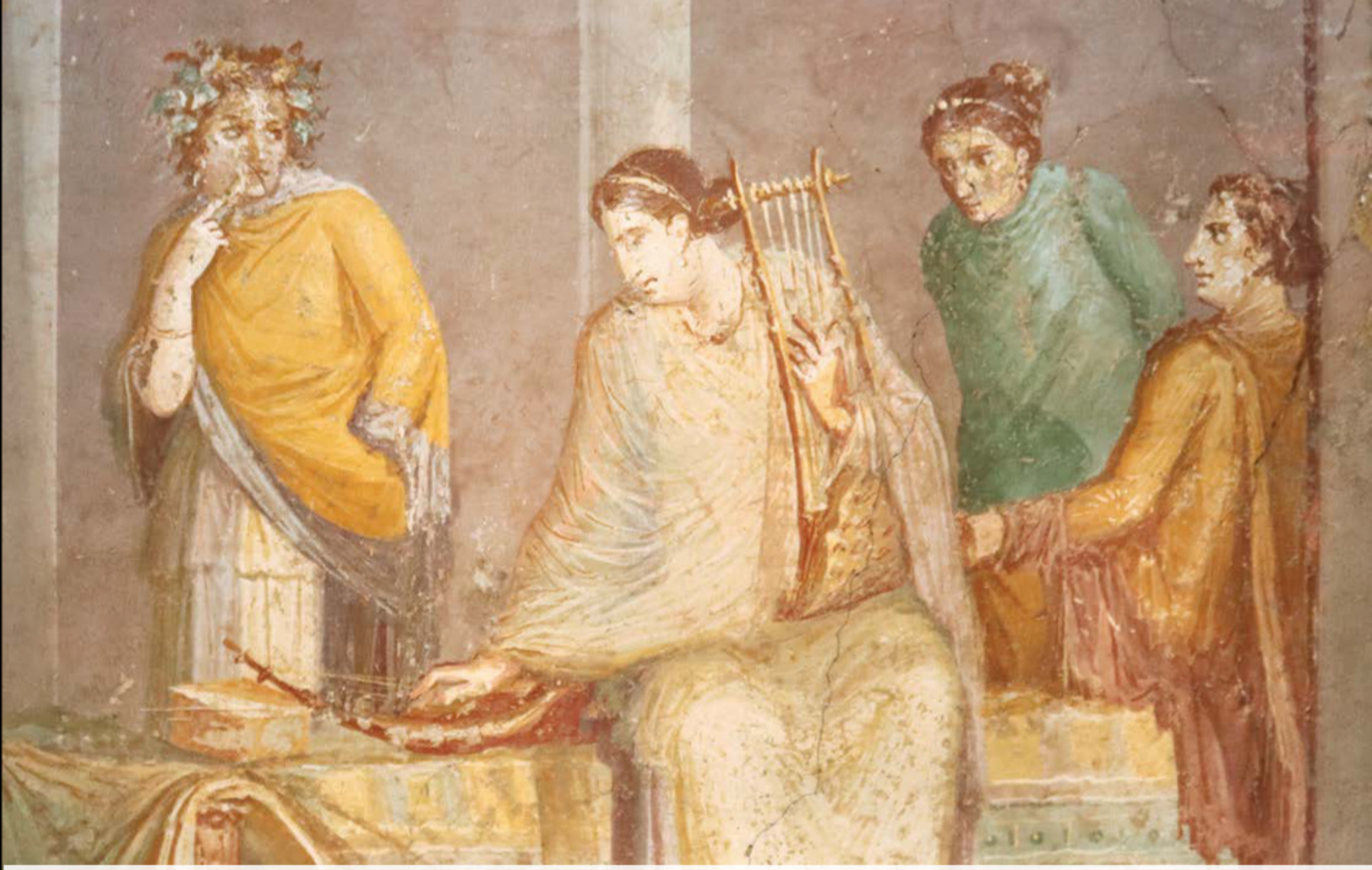


This Roman wall painting from Stabiae, dating to ca. AD 30-40, depicts a concert in a private setting. The central woman is plucking at a *cithara*, perhaps tuning it, while three other women look on.

LYRISTS, BRASS BANDS, AND WATER ORGANS

MUSIC IN ROME

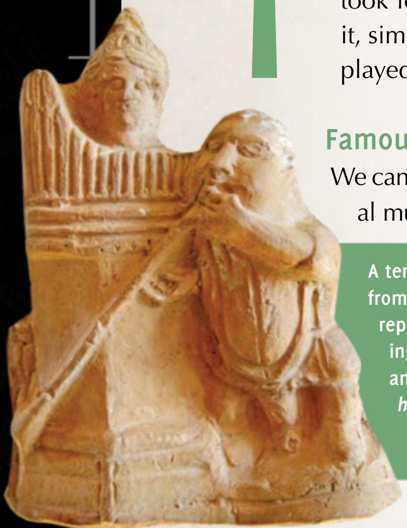
By Philip Matyszak

Music was integral to the lives of the Greeks and Romans. From weddings to funerals, at banquets and state occasions, music was present everywhere. Even apart from these formal occasions, both the common folk and the aristocracy enjoyed playing music and serenading their friends.

The mundanity of music is, in one way, unfortunate for historians. As music was something the Romans took for granted, they seldom bothered to describe it, simply assuming that everyone knew when it was played, how, and with what instruments.

Famous fiddlers

We can reconstruct something of the life of a professional musician from a parody by one Roman writer. He records how his subject received musical instruction as a youth, and how he later studied under one Terpnus, the greatest lyre player of his day. He made his debut performance in Naples, where he continued singing even when the stage was shaken by an earth tremor.



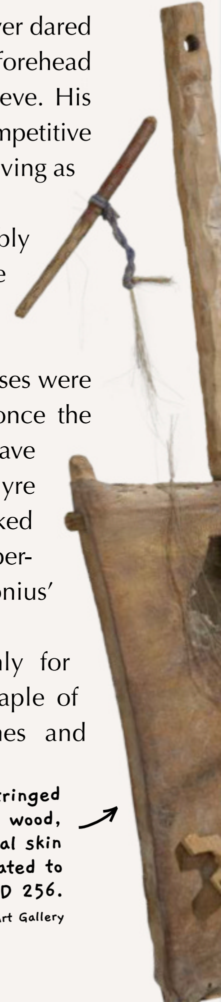
A terracotta sculpture from the first century BC, representing a man playing the *salpinx* (trumpet) and another playing the *hydraulis* (water organ).

© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

In public music contests he would put his name into an urn from which the contestants were selected by lot. He never dared spit, nor wipe the sweat from his forehead in any other way than with his sleeve. His ambition was to retire from the competitive atmosphere in Rome and make his living as a lyre-player in Alexandria.

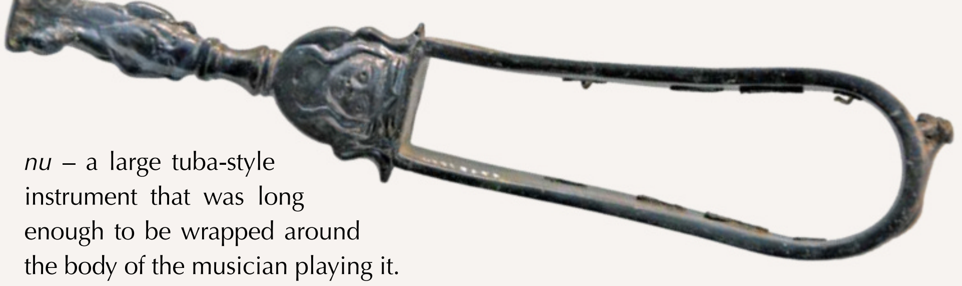
This musician was the regrettably talentless emperor Nero, who made up for his deficiencies as a performer by making attendance to his performances compulsory. No excuses were allowed and no-one could leave once the emperor started playing. Women gave birth to the sound of his tuneless lyre while some cunning individuals faked their own deaths so as to leave the performances early (according to Suetonius' *Life of Nero* 23).

However, music was not only for highbrow audiences – it was a staple of Roman comedies and pantomimes and



A Greco-Roman stringed instrument made from wood, leather, and animal skin that can be roughly dated to ca. 323 BC – AD 256.

© Yale University Art Gallery



A bronze *sistrum*, an Egyptian instrument, from Chaeronea, roughly dated to AD 1 – 350. The handle takes the shape of the Egyptian god Bes.

© Livius.org

one of the few venues where Nero could be mocked. At one performance an actor gained instant fame by singing the popular hit "Goodbye Mother, goodbye Father" while miming swimming and then eating. Nero had tried to drown his mother and was believed to have poisoned the food of his adoptive father Claudius.

Music was not only played at the theatre but also at the Roman games. Here the instrument of choice was a type of water-organ which used hydraulic pressure to force air out of the tubes at a volume that could be heard all the way to the back of the stands. Other performances at the amphitheatre were choral songs known as *carmina*. *Carmina* were also used in Roman triumphs, while funeral processions played dirges known as *neniae*.

Nero was not alone in studying music as a youth. It was part of an aristocratic education, for Roman philosophy had taken on board the idea that music represented the order of the cosmos. The emperor Hadrian liked to study music theory, and a section of his biography (by one 'Spartianus') tells us: "However ready Hadrian might have been to criticize musicians ... grammarians and rhetoricians, he heaped honours and riches upon those who practised these arts – even as he tormented them with his questions."

A long musical heritage

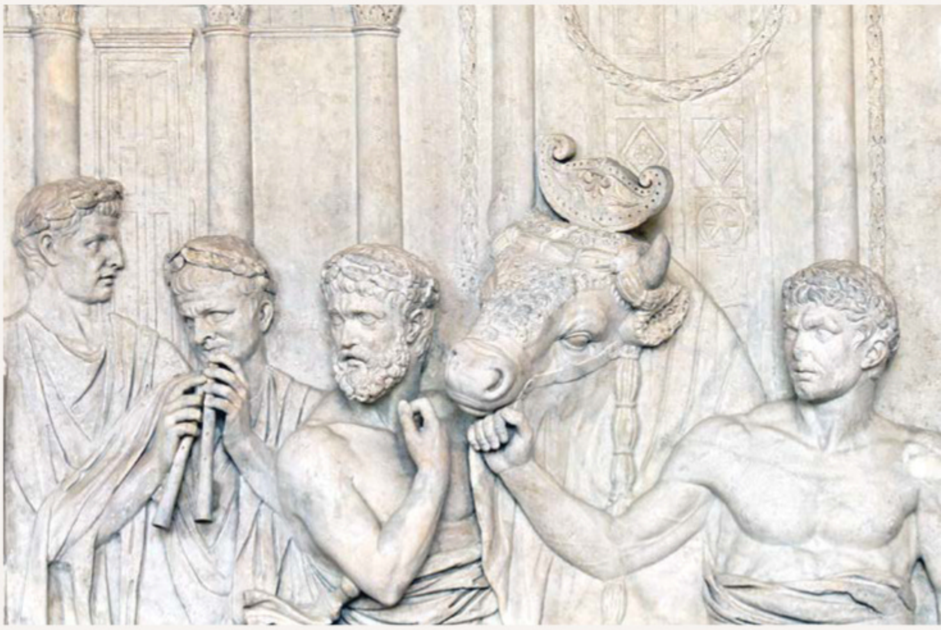
As with much else, the Romans acquired their musical traditions from different cultures. The main influences were Etruscan and Greek – with the Etruscans being the source of brass instruments such as the Roman tuba, and the Greeks the source of the flute and the lyre. In later years, the Romans gradually moved from the relatively simple lyre to the more complex and musically capable *cithara*. The Romans also acquired a taste for Egyptian music, which featured cymbals and a kind of rattle called the *sistrum*.

Brass instruments were also used extensively by the Roman legions. Roman soldiers woke to the sound of trumpets, and the use of different musical instruments told units when to advance, retreat, or charge. There are suggestions that drill was sometimes done to the sound of a *cornu* – a large tuba-style instrument that was long enough to be wrapped around the body of the musician playing it.

While ordinary Romans enjoyed their music at the theatre, at home, or on street corners, the wealthy had special theatres called odeons dedicated to the fine arts, and top singers and musicians were invited to perform there.

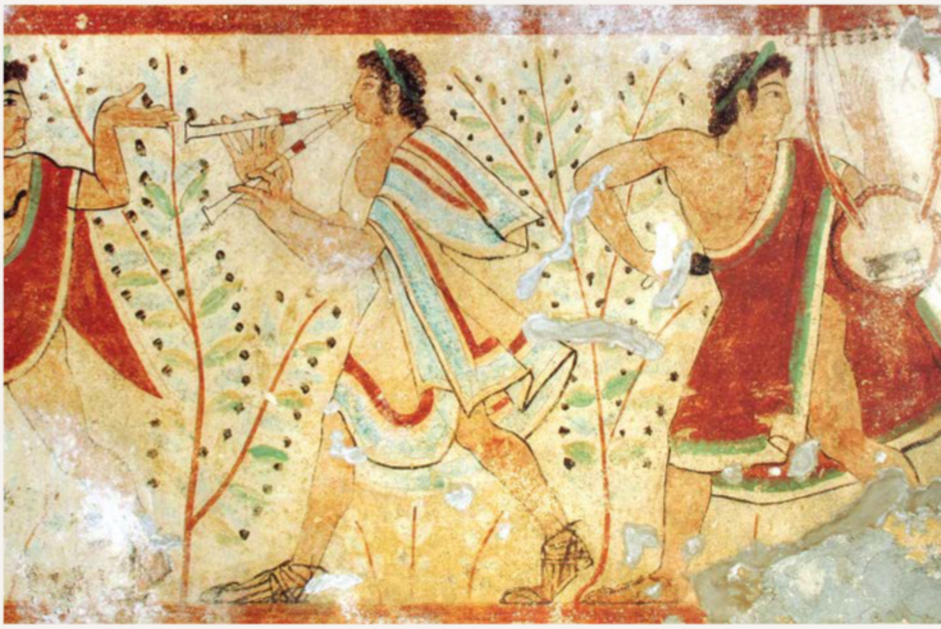
Music even had its own 'goddess' – Euterpe, one of the nine muses. The ancient Romans sometimes referred to her by the euphemism 'the giver of delight', which appropriately sums up the role music played in their lives. AH

***Philip Matyszak** is a regular contributor to **Ancient History** magazine.*



(Top) A marble fragment from a Roman architectural relief, dating to the first quarter of the second century AD, depicting a number of men preparing a sacrifice, with one playing the *tibia*.

© Jastrow / Wikimedia Commons



(Bottom) An Etruscan fresco from the Tomb of the Leopards, Tarquinia, dated to ca. 475 BC, depicting two musicians, one playing the *tibia*, the other playing the lyre.

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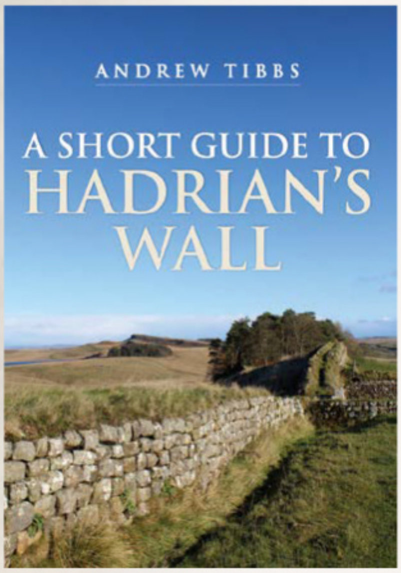


A Short Guide to Hadrian's Wall

By Andrew Tibbs
ISBN: 978-1398113091
Amberley Publishing (2022) - £16.99

www.amberley-books.com

There is certainly a lot of choice in books on the most well-known Roman monument in Britain. This new book is written by Dr Andrew Tibbs, the man behind the @RomanScotland account on Twitter. Here he offers "a short guide for exploring Hadrian's Wall – what there is to see and where it can be seen" (p. 7).

The short book is squarely aimed at "visitors to the Wall, for day trippers and casual explorers, and those interested in finding out more about the monument, and the other Roman fortifications in this part of northern England" (p. 7).

Brevity means making sacrifices. This book is *not* an in-depth archaeological or historical text and it explicitly states so. The 'Short Overview' is, indeed, brief – just ten pages. In it, Tibbs explains the Stanegate, which was Rome's northernmost border before the Wall was built. He then discusses the military features of Hadrian's Wall – forward defences, walls, rear defences, fortifications, coastal defences, and outpost forts. He rightly recognizes that "there are actually three different walls, which were built in different locations – a Turf Wall, a Broad Wall, and a Narrow Wall" (page 17) – and discusses them.

He takes a traditional view of the historical context, chronology, and purpose of the Wall. As the timeline shows, Dr Tibbs assumes a construction start date in AD 122. There's no hint of the possibility – favoured by some archaeologists and scholars – that the Wall was begun as early as AD 119. Indeed, there is no mention of the revolt (or revolts) in the island province, which necessitated a military taskforce (*expeditio Britannica*) during Hadrian's reign, for which the Wall may have been a response or a cause. For Tibbs, "The main purpose of the Wall was clear – to keep the barbarians out of the Empire" (page 24). Others rather see the Wall as a means to strictly control and manage movement of people and goods rather than to prohibit it.

The chapter "Life and Death on Hadrian's Wall" explains how the native British and Roman settlements interacted with the Wall and its garrisons. With its diverse international population, religious practices informed people's lives, and influenced their preferences for burial in death, in different ways.

"Visiting Hadrian's Wall" offers practical information about maps, accommodation, and travel by car, local trains, buses, and also on foot using the Hadrian's Wall Path along its 118 kilometres' (74 miles') length.

The chapter on "The Sites", running to 79 pages, is the core of the book. Grouping them into "East", "Centre", and "West", plus the "Cumbria Defences", Tibbs guides the reader around individual sites. Each entry includes the site's official name, its Latin name, the type of site, availability of facilities and parking, entry charge (if not free), the website's URL, the National Grid Reference, the postcode, and the What3words geocode. Each site overview details which features to see along with directions of how to get there.

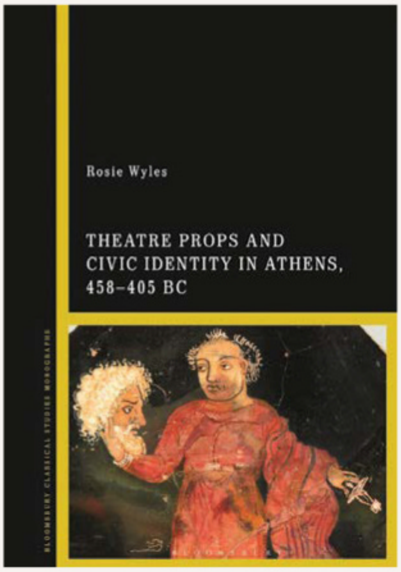
The descriptions of the sites – turrets, mile castles, forts – are informative. This is particularly helpful for the less well-known sites. He begins the tour at South Shields reminding us that Tigris bargemen were once stationed here, "which shows the strategic importance of the River Tyne in the Roman period" (page 41).

No visit to the Wall is complete without a stop at Housesteads. "Even today, the wind and rain at Housesteads can be unforgiving," notes Tibbs, "but if you had to choose a single site to visit, then this is it" (page 71). However, Vindolanda is "a must-see for anyone visiting Hadrian's Wall" (page 76), and "The gift shop is probably the best of all the sites along Hadrian's Wall" (page 78). Many sites have excellent museums, the collections of which Tibbs highlights. Other features, such as Limestone Corner, a Roman quarry between sections of *vallum*, are included.

On the western side, he notes that Stanwix was the largest fort along the entire Wall, though most of it now lies under Carlisle. The descriptions of the installations along the Cumbrian coast, such as Swarthy Hill milefortlet, Maryport and Senhouse Roman Museum, and Ravenglass, are noteworthy because they are so often forgotten by visitors.

The book is marketed as "An accessible illustrated introduction" (website). Seen as a PDF by this reviewer, it is illustrated throughout with colour maps and photographs. Site plans would have greatly enhanced the utility of the book, however. Overall, this is a helpful, easy-to-read, albeit pricey, guide many visitors to the Wall will enjoy. **AH**

– Lindsay Powell


Rosie Wyles
THEATRE PROPS AND CIVIC IDENTITY IN ATHENS, 458–405 BC
BLOOMSBURY CLASSICAL STUDIES MONOGRAPHS

Theatre Props and Civic Identity in Athens, 458–405 BC

By Rosie Wyles
ISBN: 978-1350186477
Bloomsbury (2020) - £28.99

www.bloomsbury.com

Modern society is all too aware of the potential that the arts have for exploring contemporary identities and politics. Comedians have always been pointing to the contradictions in people's worldviews, or highlighting hypocrisy where it rears its head. It seems that there are more comedy satire shows on television than there ever have been. Similarly, drama allows viewers to explore other people's experiences and reflect upon their own identities.

The same has long been recognized in the words of ancient Greek drama, from Aristophanes' scathing depictions of Cleon to Euripides' exploration of the fate of women in war in his work *The Trojan Women* at the height of the Peloponnesian War, after the Athenians had decided to utterly destroy Melos, executing the men and selling the women and children into slavery – a fate the Athenians would themselves fear after their defeat by the Spartans. Dr Wyles, however, has extended this conversation beyond what was simply *said* on stage into what was *used* on stage – the props – addressing scholarship's "privileging of literature over iconography" (p. 91) and providing a much-needed iconographic supplement to previous discussions. In particular, the aim of this book is to explore the impact of Athenian drama upon the Athenians' civic identity.

In her "object-orientated approach" (p. 3), Dr Wyles has focused on three case studies – the use of ballots to vote, the symbolism of the sword, and the function of masks – and explores both the 'theatrical' and the 'social' life of each, examining how such objects, just like words, could be ideologically loaded.

At first glance, this topic seems as though it would be too complicated for the general reader, one that requires a firm grasp of both Athenian civic identity and Athenian drama. Yet Dr Wyles effectively explains the foundational elements of Athenian civic identity in the introduction and thoroughly explores Athenian theatre culture, including how performances of comedy and tragedy had a dialogue with one another about the themes they utilized. That said, readers would do well to have a firm grasp of ancient Greek history before reading this book; it is certainly not an introduction to Athenian drama.

Of the three case studies, the highlight is the discussion of the prominence of the sword in Athenian iconography. The sword occupies a primary position in the modern consciousness when it comes to military matters, which is likely the result of its use as a status symbol in medieval European society. However, for the ancient Greeks, the weapon that occupied such a primary position was the spear, with military conquests visualized as being 'won by the spear', even in fifth-century Athenian drama (for example, Sophocles' *Ajax*). Yet the sword is visually distinct in Athenian drama – more so than the spear – with many crucial events depicted or discussed in the plays, such as Ajax's suicide and Orestes' matricide, revolving around the weapon. Dr Wyles devotes nearly half of the book to discussing this dramatic peculiarity, exploring the prominence of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton in Athenian public discourse, the use of the sword on stage, and the undermining of its importance with phallic imagery in Attic comedy.

That half of the book is devoted to the case study of the sword may explain why this study is the strongest of the three. The weakest of the three case studies, in my opinion – that discussing the significance of masks – also happens to be the shortest. While this could simply be due to a lesser overlap between the theatrical and social world for theatrical masks when compared to the other case studies, I cannot help but think a longer, more comprehensive discussion would only have benefitted this book.

This is not a long book – of its 280 pages, over 100 are given over to the end notes and bibliography, as well as 24 black-and-white illustrations. This is by no means a negative of the book, however. Rather, the comprehensive notes serve to reassure the reader that what they are being presented with has been thoroughly researched (too often books lack significant notes). Indeed, despite its short length, the book is very dense, with plenty of information for the student of ancient Greek history.

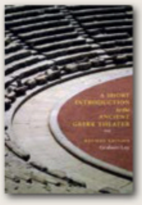
This book is described as both "innovative" and "insightful" by the publisher, and I am inclined to agree. This book's flaws are minor when compared to what it achieves – a thorough and well-written analysis of how ancient Athenians interacted with the theatre, and in doing so, demonstrated how they thought about themselves. **AH**

– Owain Williams

READINGS: A DAY AT THE THEATRE

Want to learn more about dramatic performances in antiquity? Here are some books to check out!

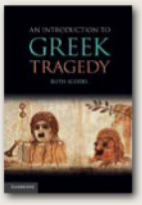
A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE



By Graham Ley
University of Chicago Press, 2007
ISBN: 978-0226477619

Greek theatre is a very broad subject with a great many facets, from architecture to literature and language. In this *Short Introduction,* Ley provides a comprehensive overview of the theatre culture of ancient Greece. Where other introductions might cover the theatrical space and the activities within, this book explores peripheral (but no less important) subjects, such as the writers and the difficulties of translating plays.

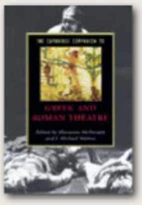
AN INTRODUCTION TO GREEK TRAGEDY



By Ruth Scodel
Cambridge University Press, 2010
ISBN: 978-0521705608

Tragedy is the most well-known genre of ancient Greek theatre. The tales of Orestes, Oedipus, and many others have captured people's imagination for millennia. In *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*, Ruth Scodel explores the origins of tragedy, its cultural and historical background, and discusses a selection of famous plays to help readers understand more about the genre, a foundational aspect of Classical Greek culture.

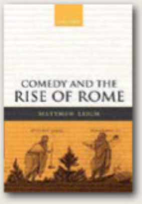
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO GREEK AND ROMAN THEATRE



By Marianne McDonald and Michael Walton
Cambridge University Press, 2007
ISBN: 978-1139001502

It is easy to think of ancient theatre as being a thoroughly Greek phenomenon. However, like so much else, the Romans adopted the Greeks' theatre culture and made it their own. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre* explores a variety of topics in both Greek and Roman theatre, such as costumes, politics in theatre, and the experience of the audience in a large number of essays from academics.

COMEDY AND THE RISE OF ROME



By Matthew Leigh
Oxford University Press, 2004
ISBN: 978-0199266760

The rise of Rome to major region power in the late third century BC corresponds to the first known works of Latin and Italic playwrights. It should come as no surprise that the growth of Rome's power had an impact on its culture. In this book, Leigh explores how these impacts were reflected in theatre, specifically comedy. Readers interested in Roman self-perception and social history will appreciate this book.

Other books and articles

THEOPHORIC THEATRICS (Rosie Wyles)

- Easterling, Patricia Elizabeth (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).
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- Potter, David. *Theodora: Actress, Empress, Saint* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017).

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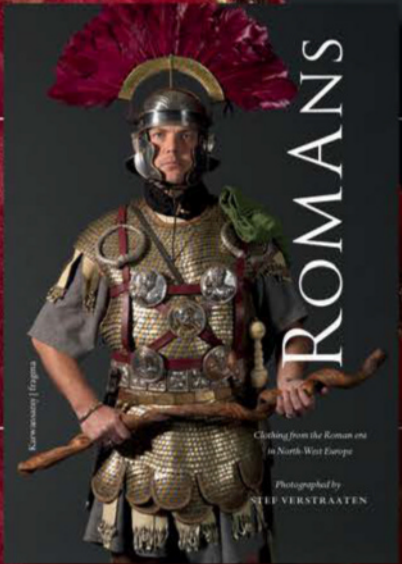
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